NATION

US recognises Arunachal as part of India, China hits back

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BUSINESS

Markets surge amid global rally on US Fed rate cut plans

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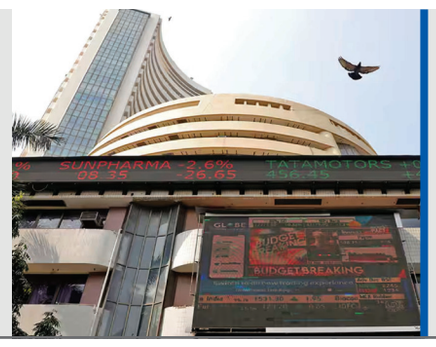

SPORTS

Chennai eye positive start against Bengaluru

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Anti-graft crusader KEJRI ARRESTED

ED nabs him after 9 summons in liquor 'scam'

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested by Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday in an excise policy-linked money laundering case, officials said.

The arrest, the first of a sitting chief minister, came hours after Delhi High Court refused to grant protection to him from any coercive action by ED. The 55-year-old leader's arrest, amid campaign for Lok Sabha elections, drew angry reactions from his AAP. The party said Kejriwal "will continue as the Delhi's Chief Minister. If need be, he will run the government from jail." BJP though demanded that Kejriwal step down.

A 10-member ED team reached his official residence on Flagstaff Road in Civil Lines in New Delhi soon after High Court order and carried out searches. He was arrested more two hours later.

ED will produce him before a court on Friday to seek his custody.

Arvind Kejriwal **PHOTO: PTI**

- AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh are in judicial custody in the case

Kejriwal had skipped nine ED summonses in the case calling them "illegal".

As ED carried out their action inside, additional police and Rapid Action Force (RAF) and CRPF teams were deployed his house.

The additional deployment was made in anticipation of protests by AAP supporters, sources said.

AAP leaders gathered near the residence and shouted slogans denouncing ED action.

ED's action is virtually a replay of what transpired during the arrest last week of Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) leader K Kavitha, who is now in ED custody in the same case.

The case pertains to alleged corruption and money laundering in formulating and executing the Delhi government's excise policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped.

AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh are in judicial custody in the case.

Kejriwal's name has been mentioned multiple times in the chargesheets. ED has alleged that the accused were in touch with Kejriwal for formulating the excise policy that resulted in undue benefits to them in return for which they paid kickbacks to the AAP. ED had recently alleged in a statement that Kavitha and some others "conspired" with Kejriwal and Sisodia to get favours in the excise policy by paying Rs 100 crore. *—PTI*

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17 NAMED IN 2ND LIST

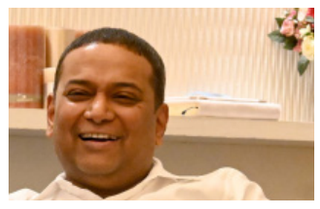
Mansoor figures in Cong's 2nd list

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

AICC President M Mallikarjun Kharge's son-in-law and the children of five ministers' figure in the second list of 17 candidates in Karnataka announced by Congress on Thursday for Lok Sabha elections.

Mansoor Ali Khan, son of former Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha K Rahman Khan, and Prabha Mallikarjun, wife of Minister SS Mallikarjun and daughter-in-law of veteran party leader Shamanur Shivashankarappa, are the party's nominees from Bengaluru Central and Davangere, respectively.

Satish Jarkiholi's daughter Priyanka Jarkiholi (Chikkodi), Ramalinga Reddy's daughter Sowmya Reddy (Bengaluru South), Shivanand Patil's daughter Samyukta S Patil (Bagalkot), Laxmi Hebbalkar's son Mrinal Ravindra Hebbalkar (Belagavi) and Eshwar Khandre's son Sagar Khandre (Bidar) will be contesting in the polls. In Kalaburagi, Kharge's son-in-law Radhakrishna Doddamani will be in the fray. Kharge had won the seat in the 2009 and 2014 Lok Sabha elections but lost in 2019.



Mansoor Ali Khan **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Prof MV Rajeev Gowda, the Vice-Chairman of Karnataka State Policy and Planning Commission, will take on BJP's Shobha Karandlaje in Bengaluru North. The other candidates who figure in the second list are M Laxman (Mysuru), Vinod Asooti (Dharwad), G Kumar Naik (Raichur), Padmaraj (Dakshina Kannada), Jayaprakash Hegde (Udupi-Chikmagalur), K Rajashekar Basavaraj Hitnal (Koppal), Anjali Nimbalkar (Uttara Kannada), and BN Chandrappa (Chitradurga). Congress released its first list of seven candidates in Karnataka on 8 March. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

STOP VIKSIT BHARAT WHATSAPP TEXT: EC TO CENTRE

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Election Commission (EC) on Thursday directed Centre to immediately stop delivering bulk WhatsApp messages to people under "Viksit Bharat Sampark" initiative to highlight the government's achievements.

The direction was issued to the Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, after the Commission received complaints about the matter.

Asking the government to ensure there is "no further delivery" of the bulk WhatsApp messages to people, the Commission sought an "immediate" compliance report on the matter from the ministry.

The ministry had informed the Commission that the messages along with a letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi were sent before the Model Code of Conduct came into force on 16 March with the announcement of Lok Sabha poll schedule. The poll authority had received several complaints that such messages highlighting the government's initiatives were being delivered on citizens' phones despite the announcement of parliamentary elections in 2024 and MCC came into force. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

'HDK will contest as NDA candidate from Mandya seat'

MANDYA, 21 MARCH

Senior JD(S) leader CS Puttaraju on Thursday said the party's state President HD Kumaraswamy will be contesting as the NDA candidate from Mandya Lok Sabha segment. Though there is no official announcement yet, speculations are rife among both alliance partners -- BJP and JD(S) -- about the seat going to the regional party and Kumaraswamy being the candidate. Earlier there were reports that JD(S) will get the seat and Puttaraju, a former MP from the constituency or Kumaraswamy's son Nikhil Kumaraswamy, who had unsuccessfully contested from the segment, may be fielded from the segment. An official announcement will be made in a couple of days, once Kumaraswamy returns from Chennai, where he underwent a heart surgery, the former minister said. *—PTI*

SC stays Centre's order on Fact Checking Unit

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

In a jolt to Centre, Supreme Court on Thursday stayed the notification setting up a fact-checking unit under the Press Information Bureau (PIB) to identify fake news about the Union government. The fact check unit was notified on 20 March under Information Technology Rules, 2021, by Ministry of Electronics and IT, amid concerns voiced by civil society groups and media outlets about the possibility of its misuse for potential censorship. A bench set aside the 11 March order of Bombay High Court which had refused to grant an interim stay on setting up FCU under the amended IT Rules to identify fake content on digital media about Centre. It was hearing an appeal filed by stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra and Editors Guild challenging HC order. *—PTI*

The Bill proposes to collect 5 per cent from temples whose gross income is between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

Guv returns Temple Bill to govt for clarification

NAHEED ATAULLA
BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot has returned the controversial Karnataka Hindu Religious and Temple Endowments (Amendment) Bill, 2024, to the State government seeking clarifications.

In the file sent back to the government on 14 March—a copy of which is available with Salar News —Gehlot said Karnataka Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments Act,1997, and amendments made in the years 2011 and 2012 have been struck down by the High Court's Dharwad bench. High court's decision has been challenged in Supreme Court. The apex court has stayed High Court's order and the case is in the final hearing stage.

"Since the case is still pending in Supreme Court, it is necessary to get more clarifications, whether the amendment can be made during the case pendency, specifically, when the entire Act has already been struck down by High Court," he said.

He has asked whether the government has conceptualised any legislation to encompass other religious bodies.

Speaking to Salar News on Thursday, Muzrai Minister Ramalinga Reddy said the government will reply to the clarifications as they are simple ones. "Status quo is being maintained after Supreme Court stayed High Court's order on the 2011 and 2012 amendments made to the Bill by BJP government," he added. The Bill seeks to help the 35,000 Hindu temples and thei r families with less income. It envisages increasing the burden on revenue-earning temples and passing the extra funds to temples with lesser income. The funds would be used to support the priests and their children for education and other needs.

After the Bill was initially defeated in the Council, Karnataka Hindu Temple Archakas (Priests) Association on 25 February said they wanted the temples to be free of politics. They accused BJP of using temples to gain votes ahead of Lok Sabha elections, and said that they were united against the "false propaganda."

The Association members claim they get a salary of Rs 5,000 per month, which includes the items required for pooja.

"Nobody supports us, and when the Muzrai Minister is trying to do something for the upliftment of the temples whose revenues are low, he should not be obstructed. A party which claims to represent Hindus' interests has done injustice to the community by acting in a way that is detrimental to its temples and priests," they told the media.

The Bill-- a brainchild of Reddy--was passed by Karnataka Legislative Assembly on 23 February but was defeated in the Legislative Council with 18 BJP and JD(S) MLCs voting against it. Opposition leader in the Council Kota Srinivasa Poojary said the government needs to support the poorer temples with its revenues and not out of the funds of the richer temples.

Later the Bill was passed by the Legislative Assembly once again on 29 February, it was sent to the Governor for his assent.

The Bill proposes to collect 5 per cent from temples whose gross income is between Rs 10 lakh and less than Rs 1 crore, and 10 per cent from temples whose income is above Rs 1 crore.

There are around 35,000 temples under the Muzrai Department, of which 205 whose income exceeds Rs 25 lakh per year. They are categorised as Group A. Nearly 193 temples have incomes between Rs 5 lakh and Rs 25 lakh and fall into the Group B category. Around 34,000 temples with incomes below 5 lakh are Group C. *—Salar News*

AFTER SC RAP

SBI reveals electoral bonds numbers

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

State Bank of India told Supreme Court on Thursday it has provided Election Commission with all details of electoral bonds, including the unique bond number that would reveal the link between the purchaser and the recipient political party.

SBI also said KYC details of purchasers have also not been made public for security reasons. It said complete bank account numbers and KYC details were not necessary for "identifying the political parties". The affidavit said SBI has revealed information that will show the name of the purchaser of the bond, its denomination and specific number, the name of the party that encashed it, the last four digits of the bank account number of political parties that redeemed the bond and the denomination and a unique number of the bond encashed.

In a third tongue-lashing to SBI, the apex court had on 18 March told it to stop being "selective" and make "complete disclosure" of all details related to the electoral bonds scheme by 21 March.

A five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud had said the details to be disclosed include the unique bond numbers that would reveal the link between the buyers and the recipient political parties. The apex court had on 15 March admonished SBI for furnishing incomplete information and said the bank was required to provide the number unique to each electoral bond that would disclose the link between the buyer and the recipient political party. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Reliance-linked Qwik gave ₹385 cr to BJP

New Delhi, 21 March

Qwik Supply Chain Private Ltd, a little-known company with a registered address at Navi Mumbai's Dhirubhai Ambani Knowledge City and having links to Reliance Industries, gave Rs 395 crore to the BJP and Rs 25 crore to the Shiv Sena. Qwik Supply, the third largest donor to political parties using electoral bonds, bought Rs 410 crore bonds between 2021-22 and 2023-24. *—PTI*

Dhruv Thakkar **PHOTO: SALAR**

Teen jumps in front of Metro train, dies

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Namma Metro services stopped for at least two hours on Thursday when a 19-year-old boy died by suicide by jumping in front of a train.

The deceased, Dhruv Thakkar was from Mumbai and a first-year law student at National Law School of India. Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Ltd (BMRCL) said the incident occurred at 2.10 pm. Trains between Magadi Road and Challaghatta were suspended. Operations resumed at 4 pm. The body was sent for post-mortem.

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, call Tele Manas at 14416 or Arogya Sahayavani (104). *—Salar News*

CSK IS A FAVOURITE

Betting circles active in City as IPL begins

SAPTARSHI
BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

As the 17th edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL) kicks off in Chennai on Friday, the betting circles in Bengaluru have become buzzing again.

Small-time bars are the hub of betting in the City and they have spruced up their environs with extra TV sets and special food menus. "We are offering complimentary snacks for customers who are coming during IPL matches," said S Shivanand, a bar owner in Bengaluru East.

Bets placed in these local bars typically range from Rs 1,000 to Rs 10,000, with punters primarily comprising construction workers, daily wage earners, and roadside vendors. Betting is illegal, but IPL is the season of large-scale betting in the City and "there is nothing much we can do about it, he said. "Our main concern is preventing fights among intoxicated individuals who may lose significant sums of money."

CSK start as favourites against RCB in season opener

Seasoned punters are favouring Chennai Super Kings (CSK) in the IPL opener against Royal Challengers Bengaluru. "Ruturaj Gaikwad, who captains CSK, is one of the most consistent batters in the IPL. Last season, he batted with aggression and couldn't convert the starts into big scores. With the addition of aggressive New Zealand batter Devon Conway to the team, Gaikwad might take fewer risks. "The addition of Rachin Ravindra, a batting sensation of New Zealand, has increased the odds in favour of CSK," a bookie, who didn't wish to be named, said.

CSK is one of the favourites for bookies in the City and local punters said the men in yellow have all the tools to win Friday's game.

Betting websites often don't require users to register with original Aadhaar cards or other ID proofs **PHOTO: X**

SALAR EXCLUSIVE

Difficult to track betting websites

Betting websites often don't require users to register with original Aadhaar cards or other ID proofs, facilitating anonymity in transactions. This makes it difficult for police officers to track them. Popular apps used for online cricket betting, such as Bet365, Dream11, Parimatch, Fairplay and 1xBet are readily available on PlayStore.

Bookies employ fake ID cards to start communication via WhatsApp, complicating tracking efforts for cyber police, said cybercrime expert Mohammed Reza. "Bookies obtain SIM cards with fake IDs, activate them and create new WhatsApp accounts. They then destroy the SIM cards and use WhatsApp to communicate with other bookies and punters. Police can't track them because WhatsApp has a dynamic IP address which changes every 24-48 hours and all their messages are encrypted as well," Reza said.

How does IPL betting work?

Bets cover a wide range of outcomes, from coin toss results to the number of runs scored per ball, sixes and fours, top bowlers, total wickets, player performances, and catches. Punters typically initiate contact with local bookies to place their bets. These local bookies then engage with the main bookies who determine the match odds. Main bookies, often able to predict match results logically, invest punters' money based on probable outcomes. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

HDK undergoes heart surgery at Chennai hospital

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy on Thursday underwent a "successful" heart surgery at Chennai's Apollo Hospital, his son and JD(S) leader Nikhil Kumaraswamy said. This was the 64-year-old JD(S) state President's third such procedure after the ones in December 2007 and September 2017. "With the wishes of fans, well-wishers, all JD(S) workers, people of the state, and by the grace of god, my father is healthy," Nikhil said on 'X'. "Heartfelt thanks on behalf of our family to everyone who prayed for my father's health. We are indebted to your love and trust," he added. Kumaraswamy's brother HD Revanna, a former minister, said he would be back in Bengaluru on 25 March and thereafter undertake campaigning for the polls. Kumaraswamy, a diabetic, on Tuesday said there is a flaw in his arteries' functioning since he was born. *—PTI*

CT Ravi booked for hate post against Rahul

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

The Chikkamagaluru police registered a case against former minister and BJP leader CT Ravi on 20 March on charges of violation of the election code of conduct. Police said an FIR has been lodged against BJP leader CT Ravi at the town police station for allegedly posting hate speech on the social networking site X. Acting on instructions from the Nodal Officer of the Social Media Monitoring Committee of the Election Commission, the Assistant Returning Officer of Udupi-Chikkamagaluru Lok Sabha Constituency, K Jayalakshmamma, filed a complaint with the City police station, resulting in the FIR. *—Salar News*

96 watches bearing Jagan's picture seized

CHIKKABALLAPUR, 21 MARCH

A total of 96 watches bearing the picture of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy were seized from a border check post near Bagepalli in Chikkaballapur district on Thursday. Police seized the watches valued at Rs 1 lakh and the car carrying them during a routine check-up. Bandi Nagendra, a resident of Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh, who was in the car, failed to provide convincing replies when police asked him about the watches. Police reported the incident to the Jurisdictional Returning Officer and a case has been registered against Nagendra. Elections to Andhra Pradesh Assembly will be held along with Lok Sabha polls and Bagepalli is one of the strategic points to transport goods between the two states. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: SALAR

73 cookers with CM's pic seized in Tumakuru

TUMAKURU, 21 MARCH

Authorities have seized 73 cookers from a warehouse in Kunigal, Tumakuru. The cooker packages had portraits of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar along with Happy New Year and Sankranti wishes. Authorities raided the warehouse after a tip-off. The probe revealed that the warehouse belonged to Nagendra, a municipal councillor affiliated with Congress in Kunigal. *—Salar News*

Will work for BJP, won't join Congress: Sadananda

The BJP leader says he is pained over not getting a ticket

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Former Karnataka chief minister and sitting MP DV Sadananda Gowda on Tuesday, who is upset with BJP, said he is not quitting the saffron party to join Congress, and would work towards "purification" of the party's state unit.

Alleging "Pariwarwad" in Karnataka BJP, without taking any names, the former union minister said those who have taken the responsibility of the party in the state have become "selfish". He is "upset" over being denied the ticket to contest again in Lok Sabha polls from Bengaluru North.

"Yes, I'm pained and upset over not getting a ticket. Yes, I got an invitation from Congress. But, no, I will not join Congress. My future step will be towards purification of Karnataka BJP," Gowda said. Speaking to reporters here, he said he wants Modi as Prime Minister once again, and said the BJP in Karnataka should become a pro-people party that is accepted by the people in the state.

Sadananda Gowda had earlier announced his decision to retire from electoral politics PHOTO: PTI

"In the Assembly polls, the people kept BJP away following allegations of 40 per cent commission and nepotism, this should not happen. For this there should be a Modi's BJP in Karnataka, it should be free from pariwarwad (dynast), brashtachara (corruption) and jatiwad (casteism), as preached by Modi, and I will fight for this," he said.

BJP had moved Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Shobha Karandlaje from Udupi Chikmagalur Lok Sabha segment, which she currently represents, to contest from Bengaluru North.

- Alleging "Pariwarwad" in Karnataka BJP, without taking any names, the former union minister said those who have taken the responsibility of the party in the state have become "selfish"

Gowda had earlier announced his decision to retire from electoral politics, but later backtracked saying there is pressure on him to contest the election again. Congress had contacted him and made an offer for a ticket, considering that he is a "gentleman politician", he claimed, after he was denied one by the BJP. They had promised to stand with him against the "injustice". *—PTI*

Union minister Shobha booked for MCC violation

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Union Minister and BJP leader Shobha Karandlaje has been booked for alleged model code violation over her recent remarks on the people of Tamil Nadu, Election Commission officials here said. The move comes a day after the EC directed the Karnataka Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) to take immediate and appropriate action on the DMK's complaint regarding the violation by Karandlaje, who is BJP's Lok Sabha candidate from the Bengaluru North constituency. The poll panel also sought a compliance report on the matter within 48 hours.

DMK, had sought action against Karandlaje for alleging that a person from Tamil Nadu was responsible for the IED blast at the Rameshwaram Cafe in Bengaluru on 1 March. In its complaint, the DMK said that the minister's statement generalised the people of Tamil Nadu as "extremists".

This is the first action ordered by EC against a political figure in Lok Sabha polls. During a protest in Bengaluru on Tuesday, Karandlaje had said that law and order in Karnataka has "deteriorated". People who come from Tamil Nadu plant bombs here, those from Delhi chant "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans and some who come from Kerala were involved in "acid attacks", she claimed.She apologised for her remarks and said she was retracting her comments. The Madurai police has also booked her for "promoting enmity" between different groups, while her remarks have drawn sharp criticism from Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin and other DMK leaders. *—PTI*

Shobha Karandlaje PHOTO: PTI

WORLD WATER DAY

The United Nations observes World Water Day on 22 March every year. Meanwhile, several areas in Bengaluru have been facing water crisis due to drying borewells PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Toddler and grandma chopped, dumped in lake

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

CRIME BEAT

A two-and-a-half-year-old and her grandmother were found murdered in Adichunchanagiri, Nagamangala taluk on Tuesday.

The bodies of Rishika and Jayamma, 46, were found chopped in a jute bag which was floating in Adichunchanagiri Lake.

Police said the deceased toddler and her grandmother are from Kadur taluk in Chikkamagaluru. On 12 March Jayamma took Rishika along with her to collect money owed to her by an individual from Adichunchanagiri. They did not return home, and Jayamma did not answer her calls too, following which her son Praveen filed a missing persons report with the Ajjapur police station.

- Bodies of Rishika and Jayamma, 46, were found chopped in a jute bag which was floating in Adichunchanagiri Lake

On 18 March, Praveen received a call and the caller revealed that Jayamma and Rishika had been murdered; their remains were bundled into a bag and dumped into the lake.

Praveen and the police rushed to the scene and found the decomposed bodies. *—Salar News*

Bacche Gowda PHOTO: FB

JD(S)' MARITHIBBE AND BJP'S BACCHE GOWDA QUIT

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

MLC Marithibbe Gowda, a time member from JD(S) resigned from his Council membership on Thursday. He submitted his resignation to the Council Chairman Basavaraj Horratti at his home office in Hubballi.

Addressing the media later, Marithibbe expressed displeasure against JD(S) Supremo HD Deve Gowda, JD(S) State President and former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy and JD(S) MLA HD Revanna and said that all the decisions related to the party are taken by them including the decision of the alliance with BJP for the upcoming elections.

"None of the loyal party workers and leaders had been consulted on any decision, including aligning with the BJP," he said. Marithibbe said that he had made an informed decision after discussing it with his followers and well-wishers and he also said that he would inform about his next move in the upcoming days.

Gowda has been serving as MLC from Teacher's Constituency since June 2012. He served as Deputy Chairman of the Karnataka Legislative Council from 1 August 2015 to 21 June 2018. On the other hand, BJP MP BN Bache Gowda announced the resignation as the primary member of the BJP Party on Thursday.

He submitted his resignation to State President BY Vijayendra on Wednesday. *—Salar News*

"None of the loyal party workers and leaders had been consulted on any decision, including aligning with the BJP

-Marithibbe Gowda, JD(S) MLC

DMK says it will stop Mekedatu, BJP hits back

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Congress has "sacrificed" the water needs of the farmers and citizens for "selfish" coalition politics of INDIA, State BY Vijayendra alleged on Thursday

This was following DMK's promise to stop the construction of the Mekedatu dam in its manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls.

Voting for the Congress would be detrimental to the interests of the State, he said, as he took a dig at Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his government in a post on "X' with "#WeakestCM #Namma KaveriNamma Hakku (Our Cauvery Our Right)."

"DMK Manifesto exposes the Siddaramaiah govt's clandestine arrangement with MK Stalin (Tamil Nadu CM) that has cost us our lifeline "Cauvery", the primary source of Drinking Water & Irrigation purposes for our farmers, during the time of a severe drought," Vijayendra said.

He said, this very much explains the government's "lackadaisical attitude" in fighting for the state's rightful share of Cauvery water with the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA), which has resulted in Karnataka releasing water in abundance to Tamil Nadu, "more than our share."

Leader of Opposition R Ashoka on Thursday asked Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar to protest in Chennai with the slogan "Our Water, Our Right". Addressing the press conference, Ashoka said, "136 Congress MLAs had fought in Delhi with the slogan 'Our money is our right', now let them fight in Chennai for water with the same model."

A separate Project Division and two Sub-Divisions have already been set up to implement the ambitious Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir and drinking water project of the Cauvery river valley, Siddaramaiah said, presenting the state budget last month.A survey to identify land that will be submerged under this project and the counting process of trees have already been initiated, he had also said, adding "Action will be taken on priority to commence the work early after obtaining remaining necessary clearances from the competent authorities."

PHOTO: PTI

DMK Manifesto exposes the Siddaramaiah govt's clandestine arrangement with MK Stalin that has cost us our lifeline Cauvery

-BY Vijayendra, BJP President

Responding to the manifesto, Shivakumar said that let DMK do whatever they want in Tamil Nadu. "I have taken up the Major Irrigation Ministry to build the Mekedatu project. The Cauvery Water Tribunal is aware of the water issue, they have to give us justice."

Mekedatu is a multi-purpose (drinking water and power) project proposed by Karnataka, which involves building a balancing reservoir near Kanakapura in Ramanagara district.Tamil Nadu has been opposing the project, raising apprehensions that the state would be affected if the project takes shape.

The project is aimed at ensuring drinking water to Bengaluru and neighbouring areas (4.75 TMC) and also can generate 400 MW of power, and the estimated cost of the project is Rs 9,000 crore (2019 rates). *—PTI*

UNDER ATTACK

CM: Freezing Congress' bank accounts an assault on democracy

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday said the freezing of Congress bank accounts by Income Tax Department is a calculated assault on democracy. The bank account of Congress party was frozen in February.

Siddaramaiah said, "In an unprecedented move that undermines the very pillars of our democracy, Income Tax Department has frozen the bank accounts of Congress. This unjustified action has been strategically timed just two months before crucial election campaigns, severely crippling the party's ability to contest effectively. Election Commission should direct the concerned to allow Congress to use the bank accounts."

Siddaramaiah said that this deliberate act has resulted in significant operational handicaps for the party from restricting mobility to curtailing essential campaign activities such as advertising and constituency outreach.

PHOTO: PTI

- Siddaramaiah said that this deliberate act has resulted in significant operational handicaps for the party from restricting mobility to curtailing essential campaign activities such as advertising and constituency outreach

In the great saga of India, BJP has assumed the role of modern-day demon kings (Asuras), harnessing the power of agencies like IT, ED, and CBI as weapons against democracy. Their power, strengthened by alliances with entities like Adani, starkly contrasts with the authentic power of India's people. This BJP's slide towards autocracy is a direct assault on our democratic spirit. The time has come for the true Shakti of India, residing in its citizens, to confront this menace. Our nation's soul is at stake, demanding a resurgence of democratic Shakti to reclaim its essence, Siddaramaiah added.

—Salar News

NO RESPONSE FROM SWIGGY

Delivery guy sexually harasses customer

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

A software engineer, Anita (name changed), 30, faced a disturbing experience with a Swiggy delivery boy who allegedly sexually harassed her at her residence in AECS Layout on 17 March.

According to the Police, the incident unfolded after Anita ordered food and offered the delivery person water as a courtesy. After having the glass of water, he supposedly left, but moments later, the man returned, requesting to use the washroom. Anita directed him and then, upon his request for another drink, asked him to wait by the door. But shockingly, he followed her into the kitchen and grabbed her hand. She bravely fought back, yelling and hitting him with a frying pan before he fled.

This raises the question on hiring process for delivery personnel PHOTO: PTI

The police officer at HAL police station, told **Salar News**, "An FIR has been registered under IPC Section 354(A) (sexual harassment) based on the complaint and the CCTV footage that was recovered, the accused has been identified and taken into custody."

Anita alleged the company failed to respond quickly to her complaint and withheld the delivery person's information, even after she reached the police station. Only when a police officer suggested mentioning the company by name did they finally reveal his phone number.

This further raises the question on the company's hiring process for delivery personnel. It's unclear if the drivers are given background checks or undergo any specific training related to customer interaction and appropriate behaviour. Repeated calls to the food app aggregator Swiggy for their reaction by **Salar News** went unanswered.

—Salar News

Kejri moves SC after HC denies relief

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's legal team has filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging High Court's order which denied him interim relief in the excise policy case. An Enforcement Directorate team reached Kejriwal's residence for questioning hours after Delhi High Court refused interim protection to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal from coercive action in connection with the excise policy case. Delhi High Court on Thursday refused interim protection from coercive action to Kejriwal and said at this stage the court is not inclined to grant interim relief. During the hearing, Senior Advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, who appeared for Kejriwal, submitted that the summons issued under Section 50 do not even reveal whether the person summoned is a witness, suspect or accused. *—PTI*

Athawale, wife meet with accident, no injuries

PUNE, 21 MARCH

Union Minister Ramdas Athawale's car was involved in an accident on Thursday inside the Khambatki tunnel on the Satara-Mumbai highway in Maharashtra due to a pile-up of vehicles, according to the police. The minister and his wife, who were in the car, did not suffer any injuries in the incident that took place around 6pm. A vehicle had a flat tyre inside the tunnel. As the driver attempted to change it, another car rammed into it, triggering a pile-up involving many other trailing vehicles. Among those caught in the pile-up was Athawale's vehicle, along with a police van, the official said. There were no reported injuries, and the damage sustained by the minister's car was minor. *—PTI*

I-T dept searches premises of TMC min's brother

KOLKATA, 21 MARCH

Ahead of Lok Sabha polls, search operations by income tax sleuths are continuing for the second day on Thursday at the premises of Trinamool Congress leader Swarup Biswas who is the brother of a West Bengal minister. The raids, which began on Wednesday morning, are part of an investigation into alleged tax invasion by two real estate companies, he said. The raids are being carried out for alleged "tax evasion and possession of disproportionate assets by TMC leader. Sleuths of Income Tax Department's investigation wing have been conducting search operations at several locations related to Swarup Biswas in the city. Swarup Biswas is the brother of minister Aroop Biswas. Biswas had alleged links with some real estate developers from where funds were transferred to his account violating income tax rules, the official added. *—PTI*

CBI registers FIR against TMC leader Mahua Moitra

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Acting on the directions of anti-corruption ombudsman Lokpal, CBI on Thursday registered an FIR against former Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra in the cash-for-query case, officials said. The Lokpal has issued the directions to CBI after receiving findings of the agency's preliminary inquiry into allegations made by BJP Lok Sabha member Nishikant Dubey against Moitra. Lok Sabha expelled Moitra in December last year for "unethical conduct". The former MP has challenged her expulsion in Supreme Court and will again be on the hustings during the general elections as TMC's candidate from the Krishnanagar Lok Sabha seat in West Bengal. Dubey has alleged that Moitra asked questions in Lok Sabha in exchange for cash and gifts from Dubai-based businessman Darshan Hiranandani to mount an attack on industrialist Gautam Adani and Prime Minister Narendra Modi among others. *—PTI*

BJP picks Tamilisai, Annamalai in 3rd list

Murugan to take on DMK heavyweight, A Raja

CHENNAI, 21 MARCH

BJP on Thursday naming its Tamil Nadu unit chief K Annamalai as its candidate for the Coimbatore Lok Sabha constituency and fielding Union Minister L Murugan from Nilgiris was on expected lines.

Also, the party has nominated former Telangana governor Tamilisai Soundararajan from Chennai South Lok Sabha seat and ex-union minister Pon Radhakrishnan from Kanniyakumari, which he represented in 2014.

Here is a brief look about the key BJP candidates-

Annamalai: Ever since he took over as state BJP chief in 2021, he has been working aggressively to bring an electoral turnaround for his party in Tamil Nadu. The former IPS officer often became the talking point of political discourse in the state, though it remains to be seen if his party could get translated into votes, its work on the ground to garner support.

L Murugan: Union Minister Murugan has all along been focusing on building the party in the Nilgiris and has been working to get support from various sections of people there. For at least a year now, it is an open secret that Murugan would be fielded by BJP from Nilgiris to take on the incumbent MP, DMK heavyweight, A Raja.

Tamilisai Soundararajan
Tamilisai, who unsuccessfully contested against Kanimozhi in Thoothukudi in 2019 LS polls, has been named as its candidate in south Chennai, where the BJP has pockets of influence.

Mild-mannered, Tamilisai, is popular among people.

Pon Radhakrishnan: A former union minister, he was BJP's lone winning candidate from Tamil Nadu in 2014, from Kanniyakumari as the state overwhelmingly voted for the J Jayalalithaa-led AIADMK, which won 37 of the 39 seats that year.

AC Shanmugam: Puthiya Needhi Katchi founder leader, who fought on AIADMK's (which was then part of the NDA alliance) Two leaves symbol in 2019 LS polls, was defeated by DMK's Kathir Anand by a margin of 8,141 votes.

TR Paarivendhar: Founder of Indiya Jananayaka Katchi, he successfully fought from Perambalur LS constituency in 2019 on the DMK's Rising Sun Symbol. His IJK party aligned with DMK in the 2019 LS polls.

—PTI

Cong picks Adhir, Sunitha in 3rd list

Ex-AP CM Tuki will contest from Arunachal West

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Congress on Thursday released its third list of 56 candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, fielding Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury from Berhampore, party Chief Mallikarjun Kharge's son-in-law Radhakrishna from Gulbarga and former Union minister Sushilkumar Shinde's daughter Praniti Shinde from Solapur. Congress has declared a total of 138 candidates.

Former Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Nabam Tuki has been fielded from Arunachal West. In Gujarat, the party has named Sonal Patel from Gandhinagar, Prabhaben Taviyad from Dahod (ST) and Nilesh Kumbani from Surat, among others. Kharge's son-in-law and the children of five ministers figure in the second list of for Karnataka. It has fielded Priyanka Jarkiholi from Chikkodi, Radhakrishna from Gulbarga (SC), Vinod Asooti from Dharwad, M Rajeev Gowda from Bangalore North, Sowmya Reddy from Bangalore South, Mansoor Ali Khan from Bangalore Central and state minister Lakshmi Ravindra Hebbalkar's son Mrunal Ravindra Hebbalkar from Belguam, among others.

In Maharashtra, Shahu Shahaji Chhatrapati from Kolhapur, Vasantrao Chavan from Nanded and Ravindra Hemraj Dhangekar from Pune are named in the list. In Telangana, Sunitha Mahender Reddy from Malkajgiri, Danam Nagender from Secunderabad, Gaddam Vamsi Krishna from Peddapalle (SC), Gaddam Rajith Reddy from Chevella and Mallu Ravi from Nagarkurnool (SC) are named. In Rajasthan Sunil Sharma from Jaipur, Sangeeta Beniwal from Pali, Urmila Jain Bhaya from Jhalawar-Baran made it to the list. Congress has fielded Chowdhury from Berhampore, who will face cricketer-turned-politician Yusuf Pathan, fielded by the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal.

Pradip Bhattacharya from Kolkata North, Mostaque Alam from Maldaha North, Ali Imran Ramz (Victor) from Raiganj, Mohammed Murtoja Hossain (Bokul) from Jangipur, Nepal VWMahato from Purulia and Milton Rashid from Birbhum. The party has renominated its incumbent MP from Puducherry, Ve Vaithilingam. Also, Isha Khan Choudhury, son of Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury, is fielded from Maldaha South. Abu Hasem Khan Choudhury is the incumbent MP from the seat. *—PTI*

CAMPAIGNING ON THE TRACK

Former Madhya Pradesh CM and BJP candidate Shivraj Singh Chouhan waves at supporters as he boards a train for Vidisha district to campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, in Bhopal **PHOTO: PTI**

Cong's Anand says caste census not a solution, party hits back

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Senior Congress leader Anand Sharma has written to party President Mallikarjun Kharge saying a caste census cannot be a panacea nor a solution for unemployment and inequalities in society.

Responding to Sharma's letter to Kharge, Congress leader Pawan Khera said, "Anand Sharma is a senior leader and also a member of the CWC. If he wanted to discuss anything, he could have brought it up within the four walls of a party forum."

Sharma's letter comes at a time when Congress has intensified its demand for a nationwide caste census and promised to carry out the exercise if elected to power in the Lok Sabha elections.

"Congress itself has exposed the Congress by showing the mirror to Gandhi-Vadras and baring their real faces and hypocrisy. Their sole agenda, going into the elections, is to divide the country for a few votes. It's an agenda they are going to people with to mine votes but one they will never commit themselves to fulfilling. Isn't that what Anand Sharma cited (in his letter to Congress president Kharge)? The idea of a caste census was debunked by Pt. Nehru while the Mandal Commission (which recommended caste quota in government jobs and education) was roundly opposed by Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Their slogan was ' jaat par na paat par, mohar lagegi hath par ' (neither on caste nor religion, votes will be cast in favour of the Congress).

Anand Sharma **PHOTO: PTI**

This isn't the first time Rahul Gandhi is being called out from within Congress for taking a U-turn, showing hypocrisy, and disrespecting what his predecessors had preached," BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla said.

In Sharma's letter to Kharge, he said the party had "never engaged in nor endorsed identity politics", adding that the departure from the 'historic position' was a matter of concern for many in the party.

—ANI/*PTI*

No consensus with MNF, Cong to go solo in Mizoram

AIZAWL, 21 MARCH

- Congress, which had been in power in Mizoram for about 20 years since 1987, and MNF had been in talks to forge a pre-poll alliance to jointly fight against ruling the Zoram People's Movement

Congress has decided to go solo in Lok Sabha elections in Mizoram, after talks of a pre-poll alliance with Mizo National Front (MNF) did not bear fruit, a leader of the grand old party said.

It will on Thursday release the name of its candidate for the parliamentary polls in the north-eastern state scheduled for 19 April, he said. Mizoram has one Lok Sabha seat.

Congress, which had been in power in Mizoram for about 20 years since 1987, and MNF had been in talks to forge a pre-poll alliance to jointly fight against ruling the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM).

"No consensus could be reached with MNF on the alliance... We have now decided to go solo," the Congress leader said.

"State Congress president Lal Thanzara will announce the candidate's name during a function here on Thursday," he added.

MNF, headed by former chief minister Zoramthanga, is a member of BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) and an ally of NDA at the Centre.

The ruling ZPM, which is contesting the Lok Sabha polls for the first time on its own since the party's formation in 2017, has fielded 46-year-old entrepreneur Richard Vanlalhmangaiha, who is a newbie in politics. BJP and MNF are yet to release the names of its candidates. *—PTI*

IN KERALA

Jayarajan family's alleged biz links with Chandrasekhar creates uproar

T'PURAM, 21 MARCH

Tensions escalated in the Lok Sabha election campaign in Kerala over allegations regarding a business partnership between ruling LDF Convener EP Jayarajan's family and BJP leader Rajeev Chandrasekhar's company. Amid this, an FIR was filed against a local Congress leader on the basis of a complaint by Jayarajan's wife alleging morphing of her photographs, while Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly VD Satheesan added fuel to the fire with fresh accusations against the LDF Convener.

Jayarajan on Wednesday levelled serious allegations of morphing photographs and playing "dirty politics" against Satheesan, who refuted the same. Satheesan also hit back by saying that the Left leader has admitted to his family's business relationship with Union Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar by conceding that his wife has shares in a resort linked to a company of BJP leader.

He was referring to Jayarajan's press conference earlier in the day when he said that his wife had shares in a resort which had links to a company of Chandrasekhar's wife. On the other hand, Chandrasekhar questioned how a business relationship between his wife and that of Jayarajan can be construed as a CPI(M)-BJP agreement.

Satheesan also said that he has photographs, released by Chandrasekhar's company, which show Jayarajan's family members with the management of the BJP leader's firm.

—PTI

AIADMK RELEASES NOMINEES FOR ALL 32 LS SEATS IN TN

CHENNAI, 21 MARCH

Tamil Nadu's main Opposition AIADMK on Thursday released its final list of 16 candidates for the Lok Sabha polls and also named its candidate for the lone Puducherry Parliamentary constituency.

AIADMK has completed the exercise of naming nominees and allotting seats to allies, and party chief Edappadi K Palaniswami is all set to launch his election campaign from Tiruchirappalli on 24 March.

In total, AIADMK will contest in 32 segments and it has allotted seven constituencies to allies, DMDK, Puthiya Tamizhagam and SDPI. Tamil Nadu has 39 Lok Sabha constituencies.For Tirunelveli LS seat, Palaniswami announced Simla Muthuchozhan who was formerly with the DMK. She had unsuccessfully contested in 2016 against late AIADMK matriarch J Jayalalithaa from the RK Nagar Assembly constituency.

For the Vilavancode Assembly by-poll, the main Opposition party has named a woman candidate. The ruling DMK, out of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, it is contesting, has given tickets to three women candidates. Kanimozhi (Thoothukudi), Tamizhachi Thangapandian (South Chennai) and Rani Sri Kumar (Tenkasi-Reserved).

Palaniswami named G Premkumar, a medical doctor, as his party candidate for Sriperumbudur and S Pasupathi, also a doctor for the Vellore seat. The ruling DMK has named veteran leader TR Baalu and Kathir Anand, son of top leader and Water Resources Minister Duraimurugan for Sriperumbudur and Vellore constituencies respectively.

AIADMK top leaders named G Tamizhvendan and U Rani for Puducherry Lok Sabha seat and Vilavancode Assembly constituency respectively. In the first list released on 20 March, Palaniswami named nominees for 16 constituencies. It includes former MP J Jayavardhan (Chennai south) and ex-MLA, Dr P Saravanan (Madurai). *—PTI*

FROZEN BANK ACCOUNTS

PM trying to cripple Cong: Sonia

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Putting the spotlight on its precarious finances ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, Congress' top brass on Thursday demanded immediate access to its frozen bank accounts to ensure a level playing field as Rahul Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of a "systematic effort" to cripple the party.

In a rare press conference along with party Chief Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi said electoral bonds have, on the one hand, benefitted BJP hugely and, on the other, finances of the principal Opposition party are under "determined assault".

"We can do no campaign work... Our ability to fight elections has been damaged," former Congress president Rahul Gandhi said while launching a scathing attack on the government over the issue of freezing of the party's accounts due to an Income Tax returns issue.

The party had earlier said the I-T tribunal order freezing its funds was "an attack on democracy" as it had come just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge attending a press conference **PHOTO: PTI**

Cong's accounts not frozen, recovery of Rs 135 cr made: Officials

Income Tax department has not frozen Congress' bank accounts, as charged by Opposition party, but has made a recovery of Rs 135 crore because of its violations of the law that grants political parties tax exemptions, official sources said on Thursday.

Congress lost the exemption for the assessment year 2018-19 as it filed income tax returns in February 2019, weeks after the extended deadline of 31 December, 2018, and its accounts also showed total cash donations of Rs 14 lakh which were in breach of the law that caps a single cash donation at Rs 2,000, the sources said.The tax authorities then expanded their net to carry out nationwide raids. If the Congress loses the exemption for these years, it may have to deal with demands of a much larger sum than it is dealing with now, the sources added.

Countering Congress' charge earlier in the day, the sources insisted that the claim that its accounts were frozen to cripple its finances was wrong as the party was free to use any cash beyond Rs 135 crore from the accounts in which the recovery has been made. *—PTI*

Karti took Rs 50L bribe, claims ED

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday alleged that Congress MP Karti Chidambaram took Rs 50 lakh bribe through a close aide for getting sanction of the Union Home Ministry for reuse of visas for Chinese personnel by a company that was establishing a power plant in Punjab.

It claimed that this alleged bribe was pumped into a company, where Karti was a director and had control, through a "fictitious" cash transaction.

Karti, 52, is a Lok Sabha MP from Sivaganga seat in Tamil Nadu and the agency has recorded his statement in the case multiple times.

The federal agency made these charges in a chargesheet filed against him, a company alleged to be promoted by him-- Advantage Strategic Consulting Private Limited--, his alleged close aide and accountant S Bhaskararaman, the company where Chinese workers were deployed--Talwandi Sabo Power Limited and others. *—PTI*

Tremors in Nanded and Parbhani, no casualties

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, 21 MARCH

Tremors were felt in parts of Maharashtra's Nanded and Parbhani districts on Thursday morning, officials said. There was no report of any casualty or loss of property, they said. The tremors of 4.5 and 3.6 magnitude were recorded at 6.09 am and 6.19 am, with the epicentre at Jamb village in Kalamnuri taluka of Hingoli district, Nanded's disaster management authority said in a release. In Nanded, the tremors were felt in some areas of the city, and Ardhapur, Mudkhed, Naigaon, Deglur and Biloli talukas of the district. Collector Abhijeet Raut appealed to the people not to panic. Authorities also asked the people to remove stones kept on the tin rooftops (to add weight) of their houses. *—PTI*

Notice issued over IVF availed by Moosewala's parents

CHANDIGARH, 21 MARCH

Punjab government has issued a showcause notice to the principal secretary, health, for not taking up the issue of the IVF treatment availed by slain singer Sidhu Moosewala's mother with the Chief Minister and the Health Minister. Terming it as a "serious lapse", the state government asked Ajoy Sharma, the Principal Secretary, health, to showcause within two weeks as to why proceedings under the All India Services (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1969 should not be initiated against him. The development came after Balkaur Singh, the father of Sidhu Moosewala, accused the Punjab government of harassing him over the birth of his second son. Balkaur Singh and his wife Charan Kaur welcomed a baby boy on 17 March, nearly two years after Shubhdeep Singh Sidhu alias Sidhu Moosewala was shot dead in Punjab's Mansa district. The couple had opted for the In-Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) method. Moosewala's father is aged around 60 while Kaur is 58 years old. *—PTI*

Punjab: Toll in Sangrur spurious liquor case now 8

CHANDIGARH, 21 MARCH

With three more people succumbing, the death toll in the suspected case of poisoning due to the consumption of spurious liquor in Punjab's Sangrur has risen to eight, officials said on Thursday. They said four people are currently admitted at the Sangrur Civil Hospital and five others at Rajindra Hospital in Patiala. Sangrur Civil Surgeon Kirpal Singh confirmed that a total of eight deaths have been recorded so far in the incident. Police had said on Wednesday that five men had died after allegedly consuming spurious liquor at Gujran village in Sangrur's Dirba. Police have already arrested three people in connection with the incident, they said. The district administration has also formed a five-memberpanel for investigation. The committee has been asked to submit a report on the matter in 72 hours, Sangrur Deputy Commissioner Jitendra Jorwal had said on Wednesday. *—PTI*

Cops arrest second accused in Budaun murder case

BUDAUN, 21 MARCH

A man accused in the Budaun double murder case was arrested from Bareilly on Thursday, police said. The development comes a day after police said it had formed five teams to arrest Javed, accused to have been involved in the killing of the two children. "Javed, the brother of main accused Sajid, was arrested by a police team in nearby Bareilly district. ," said Badaun Senior Superintendent of Police Alok Priyadarshi. Javed surrendered at Satellite Police outpost of Baradari Police Station of Bareilly, the SSP said. *—PTI*

US recognises Arunachal as part of India, China hits back

China accuses US of 'instigating' for selfish needs

BEIJING, 21 MARCH

China on Thursday said it firmly opposes the US recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as part of Indian territory and affirmed that Washington has nothing to do with the India-China border dispute.

It also accused the US of "instigating and using other countries' disputes" for selfish geopolitical interests.

China's strong reaction came hours after US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel's remarks that the United States "recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory."

Patel also said, "We (the US) strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control."

"China strongly deplores and firmly opposes this," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a media briefing while replying to a question posed by the official Chinese media.

The delimitation of the China-India boundary has not been completed, Lin said adding, "'Zangnan' (the official Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh) has always been China's territory. This is an undeniable basic fact."

"The question of the China-India border issue is between China and India and it has nothing to do with the US," he said.

"It is well known that the US has been instigating and using other countries' disputes by all means to serve its selfish geo-political interests," the Spokesperson said.

China claims Arunachal Pradesh is South Tibet and has objected to Narendra Modi's recent visit to the state *PHOTO: PTI*

The comments by the US official came days after the Chinese military reiterated its claim over Arunachal Pradesh following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the state.

Chinese Defence Ministry Spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang on March 15 said that the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory, and Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India."

China, which claims Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet, routinely objects to Indian leaders' visits to the state to highlight its claims.

The Ministry of External Affairs on 19 March said it has noted the latest comments made by the spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry "advancing absurd claims" over the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and asserted that the state "was, is and will always be" an integral and inalienable part of India. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF LS POLLS

SC rejects pleas for stay on new ECs, says 'will lead to chaos'

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Supreme Court on Thursday refused to stay the appointment of new Election Commissioners Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, saying that doing so would lead to "chaos and uncertainty" as the Lok Sabha elections are round the corner.

Observing that the Election Commission is not under the "thumb of executive", the apex court also refused to grant an interim stay on the operation of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Terms of Office) Act, 2023.

A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta said, "At this stage, we cannot stay the legislation or put it under suspension by way of interim order. It would lead to uncertainty and chaos in case of stay."

The top court said it will examine the main petitions challenging the validity of the 2023 Act and asked the Centre to file its response within six weeks.

It posted the matter for resumed hearing on 5 August.

The top court was hearing a batch of pleas, including those filed by Congress leader Jaya Thakur and NGO 'Association for Democratic Reforms', who sought a stay on the appointment of the new election commissioners and challenged the validity of the 2023 law which excluded the Chief Justice of India from the Selection Committee meant to pick the new ECs and the CEC.

During the hearing, the bench questioned the haste with which the Centre went ahead with the appointment of the two new election commissioners.

The bench said it is not questioning the credentials of the election commissioners appointed but the procedure.

Retired IAS officers Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu were recently appointed as Election Commissioners. *—PTI*

'WILL FALL TO 1.3 IN 2050'

India's fertility rate down from 6.2 to under 2 since 1950

NEW DELHI , 21 MARCH

India's fertility rate dropped from nearly 6.2 in 1950 to just under 2 in 2021, and is projected to fall further to 1.29 and 1.04 in 2050 and 2100, respectively, according to a new global research published in The Lancet journal.

These numbers were found to be in line with global trends, where the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was over 4.8 children per woman in 1950 and fell to 2.2 children per woman in 2021. These figures have been projected to fall to 1.8 and 1.6 in 2050 and 2100, respectively.

The study found that there were 12.9 crore live births in the world in 2021 -- an increase from roughly 9.3 crore in 1950, but a decline from the peak of 14.2 crore in 2016.

- The study found that there were 12.9 crore live births in the world in 2021 -- an increase from roughly 9.3 crore in 1950

In India, there were more than 1.6 crore and over 2.2 crore live births in 1950 and 2021. The number is projected to fall to 1.3 crore in 2050.

However, even as much of the planet contends with the challenges of low fertility many low-income countries will still be facing high fertility issues during the 21st century, said the researchers from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators.

The high fertility in these low-income regions, particularly in some countries and territories in western and eastern sub-Saharan Africa, will result in a demographically divided world, they said.

Further, with the worsening climate change, many of these high-fertility low-income countries are expected to also experience more frequent floods, droughts and extreme heat, all of which threaten food, water and resource security, along with dramatically raising the risk of heat-related illnesses and death, they said.

GBD study is the most comprehensive effort to quantify health loss across places according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), University of Washington (UW), US, which coordinates it. *—PTI*

2 new earthworm species discovered

KORAPUT, 21 MARCH

Researchers at the (CUO) in collaboration with scientists from Kerala's Mahatma Gandhi University have unearthed two new earthworm species in the eastern state, officials said.

During an earthworm diversity study conducted in different parts of Koraput district, CUO student Ayusmita Naik co llected a few large earthworm specimens from the Rani Duduma and the Jeypore ghat areas, said Sharat Kumar Palita, Dean of the School of Biodiversity and Conservation of Natural Resources.Earthworm varieties were identified as two new species – Megascolexjey poreghatiensis and Megascolex quadripappilatus – which are completely new to science, Palita said. The discovery of the two new species was recently published in the reputed international taxonomic journal 'Zootaxa', he said. *—PTI*

Megascolex quadripappilatus, Megascolexjey poreghatiensis *PHOTO: CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF ODISHA*

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

KALABHAVAN SOBY ARRESTED IN CHEATING CASE

WAYANAD, 21 MARCH

Actor and mimicry artiste Kalabhavan Soby George has been arrested in an alleged job fraud case, police said on Thursday.

The 56-year-old was arrested from Kollam in a case registered at Sulthan Bathery police station in Wayanad district.

Police said there were over 35 cases registered against him in various police stations across the state.

"We arrested him on Wednesday from Kollam in a case lodged by a Wayanad resident for defrauding him of over Rs three lakh. The accused had offered a job visa to Switzerland," police told PTI.

There are around six similar cases registered against him in Wayanad alone and 24 such cases against him in Ernakulam district.

"As of now, there are over 35 cheating cases against him. He has been remanded to judicial custody," police said.

Soby was in the news when he claimed that the car accident death of well-known violinist, Balabhaskar, was a murder. *—PTI*

- Police said there were over 35 cases registered against Kalabhavan Soby in various police stations across the state

₹48.06cr alleged fraud in Union Bank: CBI searches 5 locations in Jaipur

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

The CBI has conducted searches at five locations in Jaipur at the premises of Swastic Coppers Pvt Ltd and its directors in connection with alleged fraud of over Rs 48.06 crore in the Union Bank of India, officials said Thursday.

CBI has booked the company engaged in the business of manufacturing and repair of power distribution transformers and its directors and guarantors for allegedly cheating the bank, they said.

It has named the company directors/guarantors Sandeep Jain and Indra Jain, ex-director/guarantor Neelam Jain, Guarantor Sharad Kumar Bakliwal and other unidentified public servants and private persons, in the FIR. "It has been alleged that the said accused persons in criminal conspiracy cheated the bank to the tune of Rs 48.06 crore (approx). The company allegedly availed cash credit limit by submitting false and inflated documents. It has been further alleged that accused defaulted on inland LCs (letter of credit), BGs (bank guarantee) and diverted the bank funds through transactions with related parties," CBI's spokesperson said in a statement. *—PTI*

WB MAN FOUND DEAD; KIN CLAIM CAA TRIGGERED HIM

KOLKATA, 21 MARCH

A 37-year-old man was found hanging near Kolkata, with relatives claiming that panic over the citizenship issue prompted his death by suicide.

Trinamool Congress National General Secretary Abhisehk Banerjee on Thursday formed a five-member delegation to visit his family.The delegation comprised party Rajya Sabha MP Nadimul Haque, minister Shashi Panja, Jadavpur Lok Sabha seat candidate Saayoni Ghosh, party leader Kunal Ghosh and local councillor Arup Chakraborty, the TMC stated. The deceased, Debasish Sengupta, was found hanging at his relative's residence in South 24 Parganas district on Wednesday evening. *—PTI*

Kerala withdraws social media ban amid criticism

T'PURAM, 21 MARCH

Facing criticism from the medical fraternity, the Kerala Health Department on Thursday retracted an order issued on 13 March that prohibited its officials from engaging in social media activity or creating YouTube channels.

In the latest order issued on Thursday, the director of Health Services stated that the circular issued on 13 March was being withdrawn retrospectively due to administrative reasons.

The decision to rescind the controversial circular followed intense backlash from various medical professional bodies, notably the Kerala Government Medical Officers Association (KGMOA).

The 13 March order issued by the Health Services director had emphasised the potential risk of violations associated with government officials' social media usage and expressed concern regarding the possibility of financial gain through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, which contradicted existing regulations.

Earlier, the KGMOA had condemned the circular, characterising the Health Department's restrictions on social media activity as an infringement upon the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Article 19(1)(A) of the Constitution. *—PTI*

Racist remarks by Kerala dancer sparks row

T'PURAM, 21 MARCH

Senior Mohiniyattam dancer Kalamandalam Sathyabhama came under attack from various sections of society, including politicians and cultural organisations, for her racist remarks against a fellow artiste during a purported interview with a YouTube channel.

Noted Mohiniyattam dancer Dr RLV Ramakrishnan alleged that Sathyabhama's remarks were directed at him and threatened to initiate legal action against her.

As her remarks created an uproar in Kerala society, Sathyabhama denied Ramakrishnan's allegations, saying she did not name anyone specifically in the interview.

During the interview, Sathyabhama had said, "The person who performs Mohiniyattam should be 'mohini' (enchanting)."

"He has the colour of a crow. This is an art form that requires a stance that keeps the legs wide apart. There is nothing more repulsive than a man who performs with his legs wide apart in this manner.

The video, which went viral on on Thursday, was severely criticised by many on social media, cutting across political lines.

PHOTO: YOUTUBE

State ministers R Bindu and Veena George and Leader of Opposition in the Kerala Assembly VD Satheesan condemned the statement while the Congress held a protest march in Chalakudy town in Thrissur district. Ramakrishnan hails from Chalakudy. In a Facebook post, Ramakrishnan, who is the brother of famous film actor late Kalabhavan Mani, said Sathyabhama was continuing her racist abuse against him, alleging that he was not qualified to teach Mohiniyattam. *—PTI*

STRICT ACTION

Report ragging or face punishment: Guj govt

AHMEDABAD, 21 MARCH

The victims of ragging or its witnesses who do not report such incidents shall also be punished suitably, Gujarat government has said in its resolution to curb the menace of ragging in higher educational institutions.

The punishment for ragging shall range from suspension from attending classes and academic privileges to expulsion, as well as dismissal to an extent that a student cannot be admitted in any educational institution for a period of five years, the government resolution (GR) said.

It also makes provisions for a collective punishment when people committing or abetting the crime are not identified.

State government on Wednesday submitted a copy of the GR before a division bench of Chief Justice Sunita Agarwal hearing a suo motu PIL on the incidents of ragging in medical colleges.

It also makes provisions for a collective punishment when people committing or abetting the crime are not identified *PHOTO: PIXABAY*

The GR mandates the migration or transfer certificate issued to students by the institution to have an entry on whether the student was punished for the offence of committing or abetting ragging.

It shall also carry an entry on whether the student has displayed "persistent violent or aggressive behaviour or any inclination to harm others, the order said.

The GR also makes access to mobile phones and public phones unrestricted in hostels and campuses. On the other hand, use of phones shall be restricted with jammers in class rooms, seminar halls and libraries, etc, it said.

Periodic psychological counselling, awareness campaigns through posters, workshops, etc, and inclusion of anti-ragging topics in teacher training programmes and BEd courses are other measures listed in the GR to curb the menace.

Institutes shall also form an anti-ragging squad and a monitoring cell regarding compliance with the instructions on conducting orientation programmes, counselling sessions regarding the incidents of ragging, the GR said. *—PTI*

NUCLEAR ENERGY SUMMIT

Protesters hold signs during a demonstration outside of an Nuclear Energy Summit at the Expo in Brussels, on Thursday
PHOTO:PTI

In 7 decades, national parties fell from 14 to 6

LS POLLS 2024

India now has six national parties polling for the 543 Lok Sabha seats in 2024 ***PHOTO:PTI***

Fifty three political parties had contested the first Lok Sabha polls in 1951. The number of political parties today stands at over 2,500.

However, the national party count has gone down to six from 14 in over seven decades.

Contesting the general elections in May to elect the 18th Lok Sabha will be six national parties. The journey of political parties all these years has been an interesting ride from mergers to emergence of new players while some of them have ceased to exist.

A total of 53 political parties contested the first election, of which 14 were considered "national parties" while the rest were considered "state" parties.

According to the book "Leap of Faith", published by the Election Commission of India to document journey of elections in India, prior to the 1953 polls as many as 29 political parties had demanded the status of a national party.

The four national parties by 1953 were Congress, Praja Socialist Party (formed following the merger of Socialist Party and Kisan Mazdoor Party), CPI, and Jana Sangh.

The parties which lost their national tag were Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (HMS), All India Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), All India Scheduled Castes' Federation (SCF), All India Forward Bloc (Marxist group) (FBL-MG) and the All India Forward Bloc (Ruikar group) (FBL-RG), Krishikar Lok Party (KLP), Bolshevik Party of India (BPI), and Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI).

Socialist Party and Kisan Mazdoor Party had contested the first elections separately and they later merged to form Praja Socialist Party.

The number of political parties reduced to 15 in the second elections in 1957 when the four national parties remained in fray. However, the next elections in 1962 saw 27 parties contesting and the number of national parties rose to six with Socialist (SOC) and Swatantra (SWA) parties contesting the polls.

Pradeep Gupta, chairman of Axis India explained that at the time, Narayan, too, stepped back from the PSP and only re-entered national politics once again in the mid-70s when he led the movement against Indira Gandhi, whose government he alleged was corrupt and undemocratic. Narayan subsequently led the calls for Gandhi's disqualification prior to her declaration of the Emergency in 1975, for which he was arrested.

Congress's dominion persisted for a long time after the first general election, winning 11 of the 14 elections until 2014, when the tide turned in favour of BJP.

CPI formed the principal Opposition in the next two Lok Sabha elections after the 1951 polls. However, in 1964, Soviet and Chinese communist factions within the party split, giving rise to CPI (Marxist). Thereafter, the new CPI(M) continued to secure more votes than CPI in the country's general elections.

Pradeep Gupta, chairman of Axis India, said that,"Despite arayan's popularity on account of his role in India's freedom struggle, Socialist Party's election haul was unimpressive and thus, after the election, it merged with JB Kripalani's Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP).

The least number of contesting parties till date were in 1992 Lok Sabha polls with seven national parties -- BJP, Congress, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal, Janata Party and Lok Dal.

According to ECI reports, the 1996 general elections saw a participation of 209 political parties including eight with the national tag -- Congress (INC), All Indira Congress (Tiwari), BJP, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal, Janata Party and Samata Party.

In 1999, 160 political parties were in the poll fray including seven national parties -- BJP, Congress, BSP, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal (Secular) and Janata Dal (United).

In 2014, 464 political parties participated in the contest out of which six were national. The parties were -- BJP, Congress, CPI, CPI-M, NCP and BSP.

In 2019 elections, seven national parties contested the polls -- BJP, Congress, BSP, CPI, CPI (M), NCP and AITC. A total of 674 parties had contested.

However, both Trinamool Congress (TMC), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Communist Party of India (CPI), lost their national party status.

India now has six national parties - BJP, Congress, Bahujan Samaj Party, CPI(M), National People's Party and AAP. Polling for the 543 Lok Sabha seats will be held in seven phases, starting with 102 in the first phase on 19 April. The votes will be counted on 4 June. *—PTI*

SALAR سالار

How to spot AI-generated deepfake images

AI fakery is quickly becoming one of the biggest problems confronting us online. Deceptive pictures, videos and audio are proliferating as a result of the rise and misuse of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools.

With AI deepfakes cropping up almost every day, depicting everyone from Taylor Swift to Donald Trump, it's getting harder to tell what's real from what's not.

Video and image generators like DALL-E, Midjourney and OpenAI's Sora make it easy for people without any technical skills to create deepfakes — just type a request and the system spits it out.

These fake images might seem harmless. But they can be used to carry out scams and identity theft or propaganda and election manipulation.

How to spot a deepfake?

In the early days of deepfakes, the technology was far from perfect and often left telltale signs of manipulation. Fact-checkers have pointed out images with obvious errors, like hands with six fingers or eyeglasses that have differently shaped lenses.

But as AI has improved, it has become a lot harder. Some widely shared advice — such as looking for unnatural blinking patterns among people in deepfake videos — no longer holds, said Henry Ajder, founder of consulting firm Latent Space Advisory and a leading expert in generative AI.

Still, there are some things to look for, he said.

A lot of AI deepfake photos, especially of people, have an electronic sheen to them, "an aesthetic sort of smoothing effect" that leaves skin "looking incredibly polished," Ajder said.

He warned, however, that creative prompting can sometimes eliminate this and many other signs of AI manipulation.

Look at the faces

Face-swapping is one of the most common deepfake methods. Experts advise looking closely at the edges of the face. Does the facial skin tone match the rest of the head or the body? Are the edges of the face sharp or blurry?

If you suspect video of a person speaking has been doctored, look at their mouth. Do their lip movements match the audio perfectly?

Ajder suggests looking at the teeth. Are they clear, or are they blurry and somehow not consistent with how they look in real life?

Cybersecurity company Norton says algorithms might not be sophisticated enough yet to generate individual teeth, so a lack of outlines for individual teeth could be a clue.

Think about the bigger picture

Sometimes the context matters. Take a beat to consider whether what you're seeing is plausible.

The Poynter journalism website advises that if you see a public figure doing something that seems "exaggerated, unrealistic or not in character," it could be a deepfake.

For example, would the pope really be wearing a luxury puffer jacket, as depicted by a notorious fake photo?

If he did, wouldn't there be additional photos or videos published by legitimate sources?

Using AI to find the fakes

Microsoft has developed an authenticator tool that can analyze photos or videos to give a confidence score on whether it's been manipulated. Chipmaker Intel's FakeCatcher uses algorithms to analyze an image's pixels to determine if it's real or fake.

There are tools online that promise to sniff out fakes if you upload a file or paste a link to the suspicious material. But some, like Microsoft's authenticator, are only available to selected partners and not the public.

That's because researchers don't want to tip off bad actors and give them a bigger edge in the deepfake arms race.

Open access to detection tools could also give people the impression they are "godlike technologies that can outsource the critical thinking for us" when instead we need to be aware of their limitations, Ajder said.

Hurdles to finding fakes

All this being said, artificial intelligence has been advancing with breakneck speed and AI models are being trained on internet data to produce increasingly higher-quality content with fewer flaw

That means there's no guarantee this advice will still be valid even a year from now.

Experts say it is dangerous to put burden on ordinary people to become digital Sherlocks because it becomes difficult, even for trained eyes, to spot deepfakes.

—PTI

Face-swapping is one of the most common deepfakes methods misused often ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

LETTERS Write to us at salar@salar.news

Can Ketamine get you out of a 'negative frame of mind'?

MEDICAL BREAKTHROUGH

Ketamine is thought to change chemicals in the brain that affect mood ***PHOTO:X/ALLAN_CRAWSHAW***

Xowner Elon Musk recently described using small amounts of ketamine "once every other week" to manage the "chemical tides" that cause his depression. He says it's helpful to get out of a "negative frame of mind".

This has caused a range of reactions in the media, including on X (formerly Twitter), from strong support for Musk's choice of treatment, to allegations he has a drug problem.

But what exactly is ketamine? And what is its role in the treatment of depression?

It was first used as an anaesthetic. Ketamine is a dissociative anaesthetic used in surgery and to relieve pain.

At certain doses, people are awake but are disconnected from their bodies. This makes it useful for paramedics, for example, who can continue to talk to injured patients while the drug blocks pain but without affecting the person's breathing or blood flow.

Ketamine is also used to sedate animals in veterinary practice.

Ketamine is a mixture of two molecules, usually referred to a S-Ketamine and R-Ketamine.

S-Ketamine, or esketamine, is stronger than R-Ketamine and was approved in 2019 in the United States under the drug name Spravato for serious and long-term depression that has not responded to at least two other types of treatments.

Ketamine is thought to change chemicals in the brain that affect mood. While the exact way ketamine works on the brain is not known, scientists think it changes the amount of the neurotransmitter glutamate and therefore changes symptoms of depression.

How was it developed?

Ketamine was first synthesised by chemists at the Parke Davis pharmaceutical company in Michigan in the United States as an anaesthetic. It was tested on a group of prisoners at Jackson Prison in Michigan in 1964 and found to be fast acting with few side effects.

The US Food and Drug Administration approved ketamine as a general anaesthetic in 1970. It is now on the World Health Organisation's core list of essential medicines for health systems worldwide as an anaesthetic drug.

In 1994, following patient reports of improved depression symptoms after surgery where ketamine was used as the anaesthetic, researchers began studying the effects of low doses of ketamine on depression.

The first clinical trial results were published in 2000. In the trial, seven people were given either intravenous ketamine or a salt solution over two days. Like the earlier case studies, ketamine was found to reduce symptoms of depression quickly, often within hours and the effects lasted up to seven days.

Over the past 20 years, researchers have studied the effects of ketamine on treatment resistant depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders and for reducing substance use, with generally positive results.

One study in a community clinic providing ketamine intravenous therapy for depression and anxiety found the majority of patients reported improved depression symptoms eight weeks after starting regular treatment.

While this might sound like a lot of research, it's not. A recent review of ketamine research conducted in the past 30 years found only 22 ketamine studies involving a total of 2,336 patients worldwide. In comparison, in 2021 alone, there were 1,489 studies being conducted on cancer drugs.

Is ketamine prescribed in Australia?

Even though the research results on ketamine's effectiveness are encouraging, scientists still don't really know how it works. That's why it's not readily available from GPs in Australia as a standard depression treatment. Instead, ketamine is mostly used in specialised clinics and research centres.

However, the clinical use of ketamine is increasing. Spravato nasal spray was approved by the Australian Therapuetic Goods Administration (TGA) in 2021. It must be administered under the direct supervision of a health-care professional, usually a psychiatrist.

Spravato dosage and frequency varies for each person. People usually start with three to six doses over several weeks to see how it works, moving to fortnightly treatment as a maintenance dose. The nasal spray costs between AUD 600 and AUD 900 per dose, which will significantly limit many people's access to the drug.

Ketamine can be prescribed "off-label" by GPs in Australia who can prescribe schedule 8 drugs. This means it is up to the GP to assess the person and their medication needs. But experts in the drug recommend caution because of the lack of research into negative side-effects and longer-term effects.

What about its illicit use?

Concern about use and misuse of ketamine is heightened by highly publicised deaths connected to the drug.

Ketamine has been used as a recreational drug since the 1970s. People report it makes them feel euphoric, trance-like, floating and dreamy. However, the amounts used recreationally are typically higher than those used to treat depression.

Information about deaths due to ketamine is limited. Those that are reported are due to accidents or ketamine combined with other drugs. No deaths have been reported in treatment settings.

Reducing stigma

Depression is the third leading cause of disability worldwide and effective treatments are needed.

Seeking medical advice about treatment for depression is wiser than taking Musk's advice on which drugs to use.

Musk's discussion of his mental health challenges and experiences of treatment has potential to reduce stigma around depression for mental health conditions.

—The Conversation

PHOTO: IANS

2 Pak soldiers, 8 Baloch terrorists killed in attack

KARACHI, 21 MARCH

At least two soldiers of the Pakistani Army were killed and eight Baloch terrorists were "sent to hell" when security personnel foiled an attempt by heavily armed Baloch insurgents to storm the Gwadar Port Authority complex in the restive Balochistan province, the military has said. The port complex hosts several government and paramilitary offices and the strategically located Gwadar Port remains one of the focal points of the billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project. A press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations, the military's media wing, said a group of terrorists attempted to enter the Port Authority Colony but were successfully thwarted by security forces personnel on Wednesday.—*PTI*

Suicide bombing in Afghanistan's Kandahar kills 3

ISLAMABAD, 21 MARCH

A suicide bomber carried out an attack on Thursday at a private bank in Kandahar city in southern Afghanistan, killing at least three people and injuring 12 others, officials said. All of the victims were people who had gathered at the branch of New Kabul Bank to collect their monthly salaries, said Inamullah Samangani, head of the government's Kandahar Information and Culture Department. Abdul Mateen Qani, spokesman for the Taliban Interior Ministry, also confirmed the attack but couldn't provide more details. He said it was being investigated. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the bombing. The Islamic State group's affiliate, a major Taliban rival, has conducted previous attacks on schools, hospitals, mosques and Shiite areas throughout the country.—*AP*

Political tensions: Senegal heads to the polls on Sunday

DAKAR, 21 MARCH

Senegal will head to the polls on Sunday to vote in a tightly contested presidential race that has fired up political tensions and tested one of West Africa's most stable democracies. The presidential election will take place after much uncertainty following President Macky Sall's unsuccessful effort to delay the 25 February vote until the end of the year, sparking violent protests. In the latest turn of events leading up to Sunday's vote, top Opposition leader Ousmane Sonko was released from prison last week, triggering jubilant celebrations on the streets of Dakar and renewed excitement about the contest. Sunday's election is set to be Senegal's fourth democratic transfer of power since it gained independence from France in 1960.
—*AP*

Vietnam's Vice President becomes interim President

HANOI, 21 MARCH

Vietnam's Vice President Vo Thi Anh Xuan will serve as acting president after the previous president's resignation a year into the position, a Communist Party newspaper reported on Thursday. Analysts said a permanent candidate was unlikely to be selected soon, underscoring the growing concerns among foreign investors about political instability in the Southeast Asian nation that is a growing manufacturing hub and sits at the middle of the US-China competition for global influence. Xuan, 54, became vice president in 2021 and she will be serving as acting president for the second time, the Tuoi Tre daily reported. On Wednesday, President Vo Van Thuong resigned due to unspecified violations that hurt the perception and reputation of the party and the state, the Communist Party said.—*AP*

Israel remains determined to launch offensive in Rafah

Israel has approved military plans for its offensive

JERUSALEM, 21 MARCH

Israel is determined to launch a ground offensive against Hamas in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city, a plan that has raised global alarm because of the potential for harm to the hundreds of thousands of civilians sheltering there.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel can't achieve its goal of "total victory" against Hamas without going into Rafah.

Israel has approved military plans for its offensive. But with 1.4 million Palestinians jammed into the city, Israel's allies, including the US, have demanded greater care for civilians in its anticipated incursion.

Israel's allies, including the US, have demanded greater care for civilians in its anticipated incursion PHOTO: PTI

Why Rafah is so critical

Since Israel declared war in response to Hamas' deadly cross-border attack on 7 October, Netanyahu has said a central goal is to destroy the Islamic group's military capabilities.

Israel says Rafah is Hamas' last major stronghold in the Gaza Strip, after operations elsewhere dismantled 18 out of the militant group's 24 battalions, according to the military. But even in northern Gaza, the first target of the offensive, Hamas has regrouped in some areas and continued to launch attacks.

Why there is so much Opposition to Israel's plan

The US has urged Israel not to carry out the operation without a "credible" plan to evacuate civilians. Egypt, a strategic partner of Israel's, has said that any move to push Palestinians into Egypt would threaten its four-decade-old peace agreement with Israel.

In a phone call with Netanyahu this week, President Joe Biden told the Israeli leader not to carry out a Rafah operation, said the White House's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan.

- The US has urged Israel not to carry out the operation without a "credible" plan to evacuate civilians. Egypt, a strategic partner of Israel's, has said that any move to push Palestinians into Egypt would threaten its four-decade-old peace agreement with Israel

Israel doesn't appear close to sending in troops

Netanyahu said he was sending a delegation to Washington "out of respect" for Biden. But in a statement Wednesday, he said he had told Biden that Israel "cannot complete the victory" without entering Rafah.

Despite the tough talk, Israel doesn't appear close to sending troops into Rafah. This may be connected to ongoing attempts to broker a temporary cease-fire. Qatari mediators say those talks would be set back by a Rafah invasion.
—*AP*

IMF CONFIRMS

Cash-strapped Pakistan seeking 24th bailout

International Monitary Fund PHOTO: PTI

ISLAMABAD, 21 MARCH

Announ¬c¬ing the staff-level agreement on the successful completion of the existing short-term facility, the IMF has confirmed that cash-strapped Pakistan is seeking a 24th medium-term bailout package for a permanent push towards longstanding structural reforms.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its end-of-mission statement on Wednesday said the cash-strapped country "expressed interest in a successor medium-term Fund-supported programme to permanently resolve Pakistan's fiscal and external sustainability weaknesses, strengthening its economic recovery, and laying the foundations for strong, sustainable, and inclusive growth", Dawn News reported.

It said the global lender's team reached a staff-level agreement with the Pakistani authorities on the second and final review of Pakistan's stabilisation programme supported by the IMF's USD 3 billion standby arrangement approved in July last year.

The statement said subject to the approval of its executive board, the staff-level agreement would enable Pakistan to access about USD 1.1 billion -- 828 million special drawing rights (SDR) -- by late April.

While doing so, the Fund also laid bare the broader, though well-known, conditionalities of the next programme on which "discussions are expected to start in the coming months", the statement added. The top objective of the next medium-term programme — Extended Fund Facility of about 36 to 39 months — would be strengthening public finances, including through gradual fiscal consolidation and broadening the tax base, especially in under-taxed sectors (read real estate, retail and wholesale trade and agriculture) and improving tax administration to improve debt sustainability and create space for higher priority development and social assistance spending to protect the vulnerable.

However, growth is expected to be modest this year and inflation remains well above target, Porter said. Porter emphasised that "ongoing policy and reform efforts were required to address Pakistan's deep-seated economic vulnerabilities amidst the ongoing challenges posed by elevated external and domestic financing needs and an unsettled external environment". —*PTI*

ECONOMY SHRINKS BY 0.1 %

NZ slips into its 2nd recession in 18 months as economy contracts

WELLINGTON, 21 MARCH

New Zealand has entered its second recession in 18 months after the latest round of GDP figures confirmed its economy contracted in the last quarter of 2023.

The country's economy shrank by 0.1 per cent in the quarter to December, and 0.7 per cent in per capita terms, the New Zealand's official statistics agency, Stats NZ, announced on Thursday.

The latest slip follows a 0.3 per cent contraction in the September quarter, which fulfils the technical definition of a recession. It is New Zealand's second recession event in the past 18 months.

Stats NZ said the country New Zealand had returned negative GDP figures in four of the last five quarters, and had a stagnant annual growth rate of just 0.6 per cent.

The slump was largely expected with New Zealand's central bank forecasting a flat figure, while bank economists suggested a range of results between a narrow contraction and fractional growth.

The country's economy shrank by 0.1 per cent in the quarter to December, and 0.7 per cent in per capita terms PHOTO: PIXABAY

The data made for worse reading in a per capita context with the last five quarters all retreating by an average of 0.8 per cent.

Helping to prop up the south Pacific island nation's economy has been a record migration intake, which hit a record peak of 1,41,000 new arrivals in 2023. Without that population growth stimulating an otherwise stagnant economy, New Zealand's economic position would be slipping at an even faster rate.

Regulation Minister David Seymour said the current economic conditions would lead to cuts in the country's forthcoming budget, including cutting the number of government workers. "We're in a slump, but that won't be news to you, because you've already been living in it," Seymour said. —*PTI*

ITALIAN PM SEEKS DAMAGES OVER DEEPFAKE VIDEOS

MILAN, 21 MARCH

Italy's Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, is seeking $100,000 (£85,374) in damages after deepfake porn videos of her were uploaded online.

Meloni is due to testify before a court in the Sardinian city of Sassari on 2 July. A deepfake image is one where the face of one person is digitally added to the body of another. A 40-year-old man, thought to have produced the videos, and his 73-year-old father are under investigation. Police have said they were able to find them by tracking down the mobile device that was used to post the videos. Both men are accused of defamation. Under Italian law, some defamation cases can be criminal and carry a custodial sentence. According to the indictment, the videos were posted on a US pornographic website, where they were viewed "millions of times" over the course of several months. Meloni's legal team has said that, if her request for damages is successful, she will donate the Rs 1,00,000 to a fund to support women who have been victims of male violence. —*BBC News*

69 refugees rescued after boat capsizes in Indonesia

MEULABOH, 21 MARCH

Rescued refugees PHOTO: ANTARA

An Indonesian search and rescue ship on Thursday located a capsized wooden boat that had been carrying dozens of Rohingya Muslim refugees, and began pulling survivors who had been standing on its hull to safety. An AP photographer aboard the rescue ship said 10 people had been taken aboard local fishing boats and another 59 were being saved by the Indonesian craft.

Men, women and children, weak and soaked from the night's rain, wept as the rescue operation got underway and people were taken aboard a rubber dinghy to the rescue boat. It was unclear how many refugees were aboard the small craft when it capsized off of Indonesia's northernmost coast on Wednesday, with six survivors initially rescued by local fishermen estimating between 60 and 100 people. It was unclear whether all managed to cling to the capsized craft overnight or whether some had drowned.

Indonesia's search and rescue team only left Banda Aceh city in the evening Wednesday, many hours after the capsizing, and initially had difficulty locating the boat in the choppy waters off the coast.

It finally found the boat and the survivors about midday on Thursday.

Amiruddin, a tribal fishing community leader in Aceh Barat district, said those rescued indicated that the boat was sailing east when it started leaking and then strong currents pushed it toward the west of Aceh. The six said others were still trying to survive on the capsized craft. About 7,40,000 Rohingya were resettled in Bangladesh to escape the brutal counterinsurgency campaign by security forces in their homeland of Myanmar.
—*AP*

S Korea to suspend licenses of striking junior doctors

SEOUL, 21 MARCH

South Korea's government will take final steps to suspend the licenses of striking junior doctors next week as they refuse to end their weekslong walkouts that have burdened the country's medical services, officials said on Thursday.

More than 90 per cent of the country's 13,000 medical interns and residents have been on strike for about a month to protest the government's plan to sharply increase medical school admissions. Their strikes have caused hundreds of cancelled surgeries and other treatments at hospitals.

Officials say it is urgent to have more doctors because South Korea has a rapidly aging population and its doctor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest in the developed world. But doctors say schools can't handle an abrupt, steep increase in students, and that it would ultimately undermine the country's medical services. The government has been taking a series of administrative steps required to suspend their licenses after they missed a government-set, 29 February deadline to return to work. The steps include sending officials to formally confirm the absences of strikers, informing them of possible license suspensions and giving them chances to respond.
—*AP*

KYIV ATTACKED BY RUSSIA FOR FIRST TIME IN 44 DAYS, 13 PEOPLE INJURED

KYIV, 21 MARCH

Ukraine's capital was attacked by Russia for the first time in 44 days on Thursday as Kyiv residents woke early to loud explosions. Ukraine's Emergency Service said 13 people were wounded, including one child, and that dozens of people were evacuated from their homes.

Around 30 cruise and ballistic missiles were shot down over the city, said Serhii Popko, the head of Kyiv City Administration. In the Shevchenkivskyi district in western Kyiv, an apartment in a multistory building and cars were set on fire as a result of the Russian attack, Mayor Vitali Klitschko said.

The attack comes after Ukraine has continuously attacked Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine for several days. —*AP*

UN launches 'Weather Kids' campaign

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has joined with the UN Development Programme for a new campaign which showcases children from around the world presenting a fictional yet scientifically grounded weather forecast to mobilise climate action.

The 'Weather Kids' campaign's launch comes ahead of the World Meteorological Day on March 23. It will be aired on news channels in more than 80 countries around the world.

The young television meteorologists featured in the campaign warn viewers about the catastrophic effects of the rising temperatures on both people and the global economy, including a projected impact on 94 per cent of the world's children, threats to food security, and a rise in taxpayers' bills globally. The segment ends with a powerful plea from the children: "It's not just a weather report to us. It is our future." The campaign encourages adults to sign a pledge to act through voting, making sustainable financial decisions, and educating themselves on climate solutions and climate action in their own country. "The climate crisis is THE defining challenge that humanity faces and is closely intertwined with the inequality crisis. The year 2023 was by far the hottest on record, as were the last nine years," said WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo. —*AP*

POLITICAL TURMOILS

Gangs launch attacks on Haiti's capital

PORT-AU-PRINCE, 21 MARCH

Armed gangs launched new attacks in the suburbs of Port-au-Prince, with heavy gunfire echoing across once-peaceful communities near the Haitian capital.

Associated Press journalists reported seeing at least five bodies in and around the suburbs, and gangs blocked the entrances to some areas Wednesday.

People in the communities under fire called radio stations pleading for help from Haiti's national police force, which remains understaffed and outmatched by the gangs. Among the communities targeted in the pre-dawn hours were Pétion-Ville, Meyotte, Diègue and Métivier.

"When I woke up to go to work, I found I could not leave because the neighbourhood was in the hand of the bandits," said Samuel Orelus. "They were about 30 men with heavy weapons. If the neighbourhood had mobilized, we could have destroyed them, but they were heavily armed, and there was nothing we could do."

People in the communities under fire called radio stations pleading for help PHOTO: EPA

By Wednesday afternoon, another victim had been reported: a police officer killed in broad daylight in a Port-au-Prince neighbourhood known as Delmas 72, according to the SYNAPOHA police union.

As the attacks continued, the US State Department announced Wednesday that it had completed its first evacuation of American citizens from Port-au-Prince. More than 15 Americans were airlifted to neighbouring Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic.

More than 30 US citizens will be able to leave Port-au-Prince daily aboard the US government-organised helicopter flights, the agency said.

"We will continue to monitor demand from US citizens for assistance in departing Haiti on a real-time basis," the department said.

On Sunday, the agency evacuated more than 30 US citizens from the coastal city of Cap-Haitien in northern Haiti to Miami International Airport. "We hope that conditions will allow a return of commercial means for people to travel from Haiti soon. We and the international community and the Haitian authorities are working for that to become a reality," the State Department said.

Also on Wednesday, a plane chartered by the Florida Department of Emergency Management evacuated 14 Florida residents, including children, out of Haiti, said Kevin Guthrie, executive director of the state agency, at an airport in Sanford, Florida where the passengers were expected to land. —*PTI*

Rupee rises 6 paise to close at 83.13 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 21 MARCH

The rupee appreciated 6 paise to close at 83.13 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, supported by a firm trend in domestic equities and a weak greenback amid rising appetite for riskier assets.At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.07 against the greenback. The unit hit an intra-day high of 83.04 and a low of 83.16.The local unit finally settled at 83.13 (provisional) against the dollar, higher by 6 paise from its previous close of 83.19. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.15 per cent higher at 103.54. Though the US dollar is trading on a higher note, it has retreated from its elevated level of 104 after the Federal Open Market Committee kept interest rates unchanged. *—PTI*

Gold jumps by ₹1,130 to record high of Rs 67,450

MUMBAI, 21 MARCH

Gold prices surged by Rs 1,130 to hit an all-time high of Rs 67,450 per 10g in the local market here following strong global trends, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal had closed at Rs 66,320 per 10g in the previous trade. Silver also zoomed by Rs 1,100 to Rs 77,750 per kg on increased demand. It had settled at Rs 76,650 per kg in the previous close. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,202 per ounce, up by USD 48 from the previous day's level. Comex spot gold prices were supported by heightened geopolitical risks and buying by central banks, Parmar added. Silver was also trading higher at USD 25.51 per ounce. In the previous close, it had ended at USD 24.84 per ounce. Gold rallied to an all-time high, supported by a sell-off in the dollar after the US Federal Reserve officials maintained their view of three interest rate cuts this year, Pranav Mer said. *—PTI*

India to operate 24K weekly domestic flights in summer

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Indian airlines will operate a total of 24,275 weekly domestic flights during the summer schedule starting from 31 March, a nearly 6 per cent increase compared to the year-ago period. The number of weekly departures is just 2.30 per cent higher as against 23,732 flights being operated by the scheduled carriers in the ongoing winter schedule, according to aviation regulator DGCA. The summer schedule for 2024 will be from 31 March to 26 October. The DGCA said there will be 24,275 departures per week which have been finalised to/from 125 airports as per the summer schedule. *—PTI*

Alphatron raises ₹249 cr fund for investments

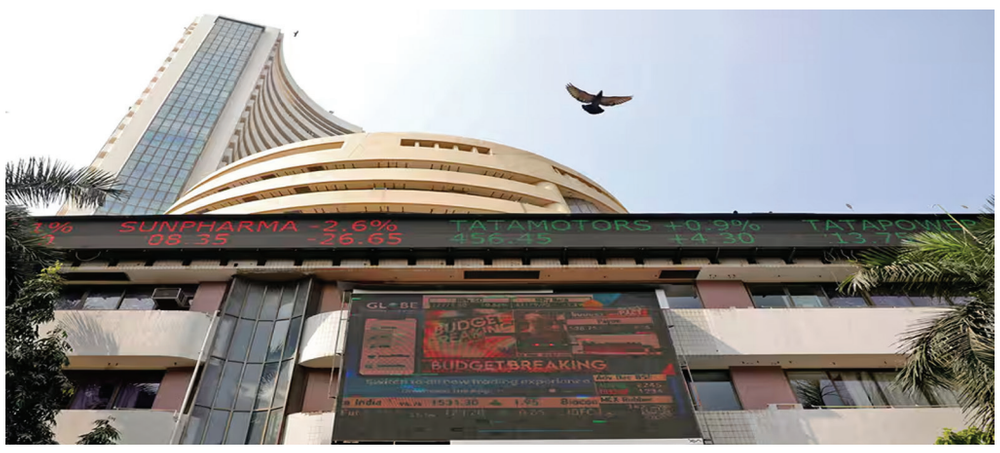
NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Alphatron Capital has closed its first fund at USD 30 million (about Rs 249 crore) for investments in India, the venture capital firm said on Thursday. The fund claims to have achieved an oversubscription of 20 per cent, closing at USD 30 million, as against an initial target of USD 25 million. The fund aims to provide access to a diversified pool of India's technology and tech-leveraged companies across enterprise SaaS, fintech, healthtech, AI/ML, digital content, and Direct-to-consumer (D2C) sectors while minimising entry barriers for US investors, the statement said. "The Indian economy, driven by technological advancements, presents tremendous growth opportunities for investors. We are excited to serve as a gateway for US-based investors to participate in India's future over the next few decades," Alphatron Capital Founding Partner and Chairman Suresh Vaswani said. *—PTI*

Markets surge amid global rally on US Fed rate cut plans

Rising for the second day, 30-share BSE jumped 539.50 points

MUMBAI, 21 MARCH



Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty surged nearly 1 per cent on Thursday *PHOTO: PTI*

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty surged nearly 1 per cent on Thursday.

Rising for the second day, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 539.50 points or 0.75 per cent to settle at 72,641.19. During the day, it zoomed 780.77 points or 1.08 per cent to 72,882.46.

The NSE Nifty climbed 172.85 points or 0.79 per cent to 22,011.95.

From the Sensex basket, NTPC, Power Grid, IndusInd Bank, Tata Steel, Tata Motors, JSW Steel, Tech Mahindra and Larsen & Toubro were the biggest gainers.

Bharti Airtel, Maruti, ICICI Bank and Asian Paints were the laggards.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, and Hong Kong settled significantly higher while Shanghai ended lower.

European markets were trading in positive territory.

Wall Street ended with remarkable gains on Wednesday. The S&P 500 jumped to an all-time high. The Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite also hit record-high levels.

"Domestic market is taking cues from the global market infusing optimism as the Federal Reserve signalled to remain on track for three interest rate cuts this year despite inflation staying above long-term target," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.08 per cent to USD 85.88 a barrel.

Foreign institutional investors offloaded equities worth Rs 2,599.19 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

The 30-share BSE benchmark rebounded 89.64 points or 0.12 per cent to settle at 72,101.69 on Wednesday. The NSE Nifty climbed 21.65 points or 0.10 per cent to 21,839.10. *—PTI*

NEW UNIT IN B'LURU

Schneider to invest ₹3,200 cr to make India manufacturing hub

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

As part of this, the company will set up manufacturing facilities for its various products and solutions across India *PHOTO: PTI*

Energy management and automation major Schneider Electric said it will invest Rs 3,200 crore by 2026 to make India its manufacturing hub for domestic sales as well as exports.

Under the plan, Schneider Electric on Thursday inaugurated a facility with Rs 100 crore investment to produce cooling solutions for data centres in Bengaluru.

The company will invest Rs 3,200 crore for making India a manufacturing hub for the group, Schneider Electric India President-Greater India Zone and MD & CEO Deepak Sharma told PTI on the sidelines of plant inauguration.

As part of this, the company will set up manufacturing facilities for its various products and solutions across India.

He also informed that the company is setting up factories in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Uttarakhand and Odisha.

Presently, the company has 30 factories across India, including the new cooling solutions factory inaugurated on Thursday.

Sharma informed that the company is already engaged in setting up various facilities in India.

This cooling solutions factory will focus on developing innovative cooling solutions to meet the growing exponential demand for the data centre ecosystem in the country. The new factory, which covers approximately 6.5 acres, has been built with an investment of Rs 100 crore.

As much as 85 per cent of the products manufactured in this factory will be exported, significantly catering to the data centre segment, as well as to buildings, industry and infrastructure.

Fully owned by Schneider Electric, this factory will play a crucial role in the company's global supply chain.

This facility is the second such chiller solutions factory of the company across the world. It had set up the first such facility in Italy. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

M&M, ADANI TOTAL ENERGIES TO SET UP EV CHARGING INFRA

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Mahindra & Mahindra on Thursday said it has tied up with a unit of Adani Total Gas to establish electric vehicle charging infrastructure across the country.

The auto major and Adani Total Energies E-Mobility Ltd (ATEL) have inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in this regard.

The MoU sets a roadmap for the creation of an expansive EV charging infrastructure across the country, it added.

Moreover, the partnership will also entail rolling out e-mobility solutions to provide seamless access to the charging network for the customers covering discovery, availability, navigation, and transactions, the Mumbai-based automaker said.

With this association, electric vehicle XUV400 customers will now have access to more than 1,100 chargers, it added.

"This alliance is a cornerstone in enhancing the EV charging infrastructure, ensuring our customers enjoy seamless access to charging network and digital integration for an unparalleled EV experience," M&M President - Automotive Division Veejay Nakra said.

In line with the commitment to enhance customer experience with partner network, the company is actively onboarding multiple partners to broaden the EV ecosystem, driving the adoption of electric vehicles, he added.

Adani Total Gas Executive Director & CEO Suresh P Manglani said the collaboration with M&M for the charging infrastructure will bolster the confidence of customers to embrace EV technology as part of the energy transition. *—PTI*

Volkswagen ID.4 launch kicks off electrification journey in India

JAIPUR, 21 MARCH

Volkswagen PHOTO: X

- German automaker Volkswagen will kick off its electrification journey in India with the launch of its electric car ID.4 later this year as part of its global efforts of mass electrification

German automaker Volkswagen will kick off its electrification journey in India with the launch of its electric car ID.4 later this year as part of its global efforts of mass electrification, a senior company official said on Thursday.

The company, which unveiled the ID.4, expects the Indian passenger vehicles market to grow 5-7 per cent this year while it is targeting 10-15 per cent growth for itself.

It will be launched in the Indian market later this year.

Globally, VW is leading in the electrification journey, he said, adding, as part of the company's commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement 2030, it is continuing efforts in various spheres, including the development of charging infrastructure that's key to acceptance of EVs, recycling of batteries, digitalisation and connectivity solutions.

The company is offering different products from ID.2 to ID.Buzz globally targeting several segments of customers, Executive Director Sales International Operations, Volkswagen Passenger Cars Michael Mayer said said, adding that globally, VW's electric vehicle (EV) sales grew 21 per cent at around 4 lakh units in 2023. *—PTI*

India's coal import rises to 212 MT in April-Jan

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

- The country registered a marginal rise of 1.65 per cent in coal imports to 212.24 Million Tonnes (MT) in the April-January period of the ongoing fiscal, over the year-ago period.

The country registered a marginal rise of 1.65 per cent in coal imports to 212.24 Million Tonnes (MT) in the April-January period of the ongoing fiscal, over the year-ago period. India's coal import was 208.78 MT in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal, according to data compiled by Mjunction Services Ltd.

Mjunction Services Ltd is a B2B e-commerce platform.

During the April-January period of the current fiscal, the volume of non-coking coal imports was 136.47 MT, slightly lower than 136.90 MT imported during the same period last financial year, according to the data.

Coking coal import was at 47.32 MT during the April-January 2023-24, higher than 46.09 MT recorded in the April-January period of FY23.

The coal import in January through the major and non-major ports also increased to 19.81 MT, over 16.97 MT in the corresponding month of the previous fiscal. Of the total imports in January, non-coking coal import was at 12.10 MT, against 10.01 MT imported in January last financial year. *—PTI*

MORE THAN PORN SITES

Piracy sites host more malware

MUMBAI, 21 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Accessing pirated websites carries a higher risk of malware infection for Indian consumers compared to other platforms like those of adult content and gambling advertisements, says a study.

Indian consumers underestimate their true cyber risk when using piracy sites, and there is an urgent need to address cybersecurity threats associated with these websites, as per the study by experts at the Indian School of Business (ISB).

The 18-24 age group exhibits low awareness levels of cyber risks despite frequent engagement with these platforms, said 'The Piracy-Malware Nexus in India: A Perceptions and Experience and Empirical Analysis' report released here on Tuesday.

According to the report, "accessing pirated websites carries a higher risk of malware infection (59 per cent) compared to other platforms, such as the adult industry (57 per cent) and gambling advertisements (53 per cent)."

The study analysed 150 websites using VirusTotal, indicating cyber risk categories such as malicious content, malware, suspicious activity, phishing attempts and spam.

Additionally, the report found scam piracy websites pose a greater risk of exposing users to cyber threats compared to standard piracy sites, particularly popular ones.

It said that online piracy in India remains profitable, with malware distribution serving as an additional revenue stream for piracy site operators. The report emphasised the importance of making internet users aware of the real online risks they face when accessing pirated websites and services. Brijesh Singh, principal secretary to the chief minister of Maharashtra, who attended the study release event, flagged malware as a significant threat.. *—PTI*

RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION

Viewers increasingly want more transparency about whether the content they are seeing is altered or synthetic *PHOTO: X*

YouTube mandates labelling of altered, AI-made content

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

- Google-owned online video platform YouTube has asked its creators to label synthetic and AI-generated content, in an effort towards supporting responsible AI innovation.

Google-owned online video platform YouTube has asked its creators to label synthetic and AI-generated content, in an effort towards supporting responsible AI innovation. Viewers increasingly want more transparency about whether the content they're seeing is altered or synthetic, YouTube said in a blog post.

"We're introducing a new tool in Creator Studio requiring creators to disclose to viewers when realistic content - content a viewer could easily mistake for a real person, place, scene, or event - is made with altered or synthetic media, including generative AI. We're not requiring creators to disclose content that is clearly unrealistic, animated, includes special effects, or has used generative AI for production assistance," the blog post said.

A label will appear in the expanded description, but for videos that touch on more sensitive topics like health, news, elections, or finance, YouTube will also show a more prominent label on the video itself.

YouTube said the labels will roll out across all YouTube surfaces and formats in the weeks ahead, starting with the mobile app, followed by visibility across its desktop and TV formats.

The video platform said it will grant some time to its creators to adjust to the new process, but will consider enforcement measures in the future for creators who consistently choose not to disclose this information.

"In some cases, YouTube may add a label even when a creator hasn't disclosed it, especially if the altered or synthetic content has the potential to confuse or mislead people," YouTube said.

YouTube is also working towards an updated privacy process for people to request the removal of AI-generated or other synthetic or altered content that simulates an identifiable individual, including their face or voice. *—PTI*

Reddit set to make stock market debut

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Reddit and its eclectic bazaar of online communities is ready to plumb high-stakes territory - the stock market.

The company said Wednesday that it had priced its IPO at $34 a share. Shares will begin trading today on the New York Stock Exchange under the ticker symbol "RDDT" in a market debut likely to spur a flurry of commentary on Reddit's own platform, as well as competing social media outlets. The IPO will test the quirky company's ability to overcome a nearly 20-year history colored by uninterrupted losses, management turmoil and occasional user backlashes to build a sustainable business.

The interest surrounding Reddit stems largely from a large audience that religiously visits the service to discuss a potpourri of subjects that range from silly memes to existential worries, as well as get recommendations from like-minded people.

About 76 million users checked into one of Reddit's roughly 100,000 communities in December, according to the regulatory disclosures required before the San Francisco company goes public. Reddit set aside up to 1.76 million of 15.3 million shares being offered in the IPO for users of its service. Per the usual IPO custom, the remaining shares are expected to be bought primarily by mutual funds and other institutional investors betting Reddit is ready for prime time in finance.Reddit's moneymaking potential also has attracted some prominent supporters, including OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who accumulated a stake as an early investor that has made him one of the company's biggest shareholders. Altman owns 12.2 million shares of Reddit stock, according to the company's IPO disclosures.By the tech industry's standards, Reddit remains extraordinarily small for a company that has been around as long as it has.

With its stock priced at $34 per share, Reddit will have a market value of $6.4 billion. Meanwhile, Meta Platforms - who biggest social media service Facebook was started just 18 months earlier than Reddit -- boasts a market value of more than $1.2 trillion. *—PTI*

NMDC REDUCES IRON ORE LUMP RATE BY RS 200 PER TONNE

BENGALURU, 21 MARCH

State-owned NMDC on Thursday said it has slashed prices of iron ore and fines by Rs 200 per tonne and Rs 250 per tonne, respectively.

The rates of lump ore have been revised to Rs 5,800 per tonne and that of fines to Rs 5,060 per tonne, NMDC said in an exchange filing.

The prices are effective from Thursday and exclude royalty, District Mineral Fund (DMF), National Mineral Exploration Trust (DMET), cess, forest permit fee, and other taxes, the company said.

In the last price revision announced on January 24, the company had fixed the rates of lump ore at Rs 6,000 per tonne and of fines at Rs 5,310 a tonne. *—PTI*

Chennai eye positive start against Bengaluru

Thala makes way for Rituraj as skipper of CSK

CHENNAI, 21 MARCH

A high-stakes match between cross-city rivals Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru here on Friday will usher in IPL 2024, but, beyond the grandeur around it, the two protagonists will have to find early answers to some deep questions as they attempt to enter a rarefied territory. The Super Kings are five-time and defending champions, and a sixth title will put them in a space where no team has entered so far, not even Mumbai Indians, who also have five IPL trophies.

On the other hand, the Royal Challengers, who recently grabbed their maiden title through the Women's Premier League, will be eager to add a first IPL title to their shelf.

However, they have their challenges to master.

The Super Kings have been the torch-bearers of success in the IPL under MS Dhoni, who has shown no sign of slowing down even at 42.

MS Dhoni and Ruturaj Gaikwad **PHOTO: PTI**

While his cricketing brain is still immune to advancing years, the passing summers have caught up with his reflexes as a batsman.

So, the younger names will have to step up. The CSK have placed enormous faith in recruit Rachin Ravindra in the absence of Devon Conway, who will miss the initial part of IPL due to a thumb injury.

The CSK has more Kiwi flavor in Daryl Mitchell, a hard-hitting middle-order batter and a handy seamer.

In batting, they can also look to bank on the experience of Ajinkya Rahane and the youthful exuberance of opener Ruturaj Gaikwad, who is entering the IPL after top-scoring for Maharashtra in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy.

But their true strength lies in a clutch of all-rounders and spinners who can use the abrasive Chidambaram Stadium pitch to the hilt.

The likes of Ravindra Jadeja, Mitchell Santner, Moeen Ali, Ravindra, Maheesh Theekshana can make even the best dance to their tunes here. The CSK also have two wily domestic campaigners in pacers Deepak Chahar and Shardul Thakur.

The legendary **Mahendra Singh Dhoni** on Thursday "handed" over the Chennai Super Kings captaincy to opener Ruturaj Gaikwad on the eve of the IPL opener here, a stunning decision that is bound to send speculation swirling on his playing future with the franchise. In a post on X, the Indian Premier League made the announcement a day before CSK took on Royal Challengers Bangalore. The five-time champions issued a brief statement soon after.

—PTI

TODAY'S MATCH

Time: 8.00 PM

Where To Watch:

Jio Cinema, Star Sports Network

Stadium: MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai

CSK weren't ready to move on from Dhoni in 2022: Fleming

CHENNAI, 21 MARCH

Stephen Fleming **PHOTO: PTI**

Chennai Super Kings were not ready to move on from MS Dhoni despite appointing Ravindra Jadeja as their skipper in IPL 2022, admitted head coach Stephen Fleming after the five-time winners made the leadership change with Ruturaj Gaikwad taking charge, here on Thursday. On the eve of the IPL 2024 season-opener against Royal Challengers Bangalore here, CSK announced that opening batter Gaikwad will take over the captaincy reins from Dhoni. In 2022, CSK entered the IPL with Jadeja as their skipper but it was a move that backfired. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

French soccer to be rebranded as Ligue 1

DUBAI, 21 MARCH

S McDonald's will become the title sponsor of the French league from July for the next three seasons, the league said on Thursday.The fast-food chain is succeeding Uber Eats as the title sponsor of Ligue 1. Financial details of the deal were not disclosed.According to L'Equipe newspaper, which did not specify its sources, McDonald's will pay 30 million euros per season ($33 million). The sports outlet said the food delivery service Uber Eats currently pays about 16 million euros ($17.5 million) per season."This partnership marks the coming together of two major institutions that are deeply rooted in the daily lives and collective imagination of the French people," the French league said. "Through its national network of 1,560 restaurants, McDonald's will enable Ligue 1 to get even closer to its fans across the country." Jacques Mignault, president of McDonald's France, added: "McDonald's and Ligue 1 is a partnership that makes perfect sense."Building on this close relationship, we intend to help an even greater number of football fans to enjoy their passion to the full." LFP and McDonald's also say they intend to use the partnership to support their long-standing commitments against a sedentary lifestyle. RMC Sport also adds that the McDonald's deal could help to cushion the blow of Kylian Mbappe's imminent transfer to Real Madrid, with the loss of the Paris Saint-Germain star likely to hurt the league commercially.

—AP

PCB is in touch with Langer for head coach role

KARACHI, 21 MARCH

After Shane Watson turned down the offer, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is in contact with several foreign coaches, including Justin Langer and Gary Kirsten, to work with the national team as head coach on a long-term contract. According to the "Jang" newspaper, the PCB has contacted high-profile names such as Langer, Kirsten, Mike Hesson, Matthew Hayden, Eoin Morgan and Phil Simmons. The PCB Chairman, Mohsin Naqvi said he wanted a foreign coaching and support staff to work with the Pakistan team because of the upcoming ICC events including the T20 World Cup and the Champions Trophy.Zaka Ashraf, the former PCB chairman, had sidelined foreign coaches, Mickey Arthur, Grant Bradburn, and Andrew Puttick after the World Cup in India, opting to turn towards domestic former players as coaches. *—AP*

Eventing National C'ship begins in New Delhi

NEW DELHI,21 MARCH

Close to 200 riders will compete in the Eventing National Championship, the Equestrian Federation of India (EFI) announced on Thursday. The first leg of the competition began today and the second and final leg will commence on 28 March. The Eventing competition, also known as Horse Trial, comprises three disciplines Dressage, Cross Country, and Show Jumping. In Eventing, the Show Jumping competition unfolds on day three. "We will have around 36 teams and nearly 200 riders competing over three days.

—PTI

PARIS GAMES

Sharath to be India's flag bearer

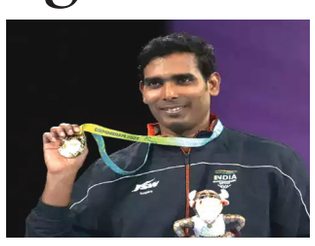
NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Veteran table tennis player and reigning CWG champion Sharath Kamal will be India's flag bearer at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games while legendary boxer MC Mary Kom was on Thursday appointed the chef de mission of the country's contingent.

The 41-year-old table tennis player symbolizes "the unity and spirit of our contingent as they compete on the Olympic stage", the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) said in a statement while making announcement."It has been an unbelievable three weeks. From not even sure of Olympic berth to playing the way I did in Singapore last week, jumping 54 spots in the rankings to being named India's flag bearer," Kamal told PTI."

It is the biggest honour and fairytale stuff considering it is going to be my fifth and last Olympics. Also, not many TT players have got that honor, globally.

I just got a call from IOA and I could not believe it."Kamal was India's flag bearer at the closing ceremony of the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, where he won three gold medals.Recently, the Indian men's and women's teams qualified for the team events of the Olympics for the first time by their rankings. Six-time World Champion Mary Kom, the bronze medallist at the 2012 London Olympics, will be assisted by luger Shiva Keshavan, who has been appointed the deputy chef de mission."



Mary Kom and Sharath Kamal **PHOTO: PTI**

Mary Kom's unparalleled dedication to sports and inspiring journey makes her a natural choice to guide and mentor our athletes at the Olympics," IOA said."Keshavan, a former Olympian in luge, brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to support the team's management and coordination efforts."Olympic bronze medallist in rifle shooting Gagan Narang will oversee India's operations at the shooting range, which is very far from the main venues.India will be sending its largest-ever shooting contingent to Paris with 19 quotas already in its pocket."His (Narang's) meticulous approach and understanding of athletes' needs will ensure a conducive environment for our shooters," the statement added."These appointments represent a blend of experience, expertise, and leadership that will contribute significantly to the success of our athletes on the global stage, the statement added. Commenting on the appointments, IOA president PT Usha, said, "We are delighted to have such a distinguished and capable team of officials leading our contingent for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. *—PTI*

Calicut Heroes beat Delhi Toofans

CHENNAI, 21 MARCH

Calicut Heroes came up with a stunning performance to upset Delhi Toofans in the Prime Volleyball League final here on Thursday, securing a 15-13, 15-10, 13-15, 15-12 victory, thus conquering their maiden title.

Delhi started well, defending Calicut's aggressive attacks. Lazar Dodic and Santhosh presented their attacking prowess, only for a series of serve errors from Delhi allowing Calicut to overcome the deficit.Vikas Maan made solid blocks, whereas Jerome Vinith contributed to Calicut's defense. Meanwhile, Perotto's magical super serve helped Calicut attain an early lead in the contest.

Delhi started to attack from the middle, engaging Aayush and Aponza, whereas Calicut depended on Jerome and Chirag's attack from opposite ends.

Danial's monster block on Dodic boosted Calicut's courage. Delhi did not help itself with some unforced errors, and Calicut began to sail through.

Danial then made a couple of essential blocks on the Delhi attackers, and Calicut extended the lead to 2-0. Santhosh found himself shackled by Danial, while Perotto continued with his attacking approach.

Calicut Heroes celebrate after winning the title **PHOTO: PTI**

Two crucial blocks from Aponza and Manoj inspired Delhi to win the third set. Mukesh became an unlikely hero for Delhi, whereas Rohit's electrifying serves tested Calicut.

Nevertheless, in the fourth set, Jerome canceled out Delhi's defense with barbaric hits from the right, and Calicut completed a monumental title success. *—PTI*

GERMANY SWITCHING KIT SUPPLIER TO NIKE

BERLIN, 21 MARCH

German soccer and Adidas are breaking up. American sportswear giant Nike will supply all of Germany's national teams with its apparel and equipment from 2027, the German Soccer Federation (DFB) announced Thursday.

The new deal extends to 2034 and ends Germany's long-standing association with Adidas, which goes back some 70 years.

"We're looking forward to working with Nike and the trust they've placed in us," federation president Bernd Neuendorf said in a statement. "The future partnership will enable the DFB to continue to carry out key tasks in the coming decade about the comprehensive development of soccer in Germany. *—AP*

PHOTO: AFP

Ashok and Kumar secure berths for Paris Paralympics

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Indian para-powerlifters, Ashok Kumar and Paramjeet Kumar, qualified for the 2024 Paralympics in Paris, clinching silver medals on Day Two of the Para Powerlifting World Cup, in Egypt on Thursday.

Asian Games bronze medallist Ashok Kumar showcased remarkable strength and determination, securing his Paralympic berth with lifts of 192kg and 196kg, despite a setback during his second attempt. Ranked World No. 6, his stellar performance firmly places him on the qualification pathway for the Paris Paralympics 2024.*—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Haaland plays down injury concerns

NEW DELHI, 21 MARCH

Erling Haaland played down concerns he sustained a training injury with Norway this week, revealing a message he was sent by Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola before going away on international duty. Haaland has linked up with his national team ahead of friendly matches against the Czech Republic on Friday and Slovakia on Tuesday.

Footage from a Norway training session on Tuesday showed Haaland in apparent pain, even if the Norwegian team doctor said afterward there was no problem with the striker's fitness.

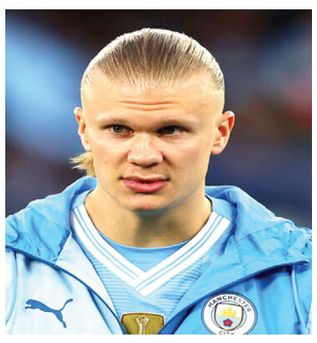
Speaking at a news conference in Oslo on Thursday, Haaland said he was "feeling fine."

"I didn't walk off the training — I don't know who wrote that," he said in English. "I trained the full training, and I'm feeling good and ready to play the game."

Guardiola will be hoping Haaland comes through Norway's games unscathed, with City facing a run of big matches after the international break in its bid to win the English Premier League-FA Cup-Champions League treble for the second straight season.

Indeed, City plays Arsenal, one of its rivals for the Premier League title, in its first game after the international break on March 31.

Haaland, the top scorer in the Premier League last season and this season so far, has already missed nearly two months of this season because of a foot injury. *—AP*



Erling Haaland **PHOTO: AFP**

MIAMI OPEN

Murray beats weary Berrettini, Osaka advances

MIAMI GARDENS, 21 MARCH

Andy Murray won another lengthy match with Matteo Berrettini, who appeared weary and leaned on his racket to keep his balance during Murray's 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory Wednesday at the Miami Open.

Playing his first match on the ATP Tour this season, Berrettini was serving with Murray leading 5-2 in the second set when he seemed to become dizzy, resting his racket on the court to hold himself up. He was visited by a medical attendant, who checked his blood pressure before play continued.

Berrettini left the court after dropping that set but was able to finish the match, which lasted 2 hours, and 49 minutes.

It was a rematch of Murray's 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 6-7 (7), 7-6 (10-6) victory that lasted more than 4 1/2 hours in the first round of the 2023 Australian Open.

"It was a great win for me," Murray said. "Started a little bit slow but then I did think I played pretty well across the end of the first set through to the end of the match. Created a lot of opportunities and he was struggling for a little bit end of the second and the beginning of the third, and I capitalized on that and got off to a quick start in the third and served it out well at the end."

Plagued by injuries, Berrettini hadn't played a match on tour since being forced to retire during his match in the second round of last year's U.S. Open. The 2021 Wimbledon runner-up returned last week and reached the final of a Challenger tour tournament in Phoenix.

Andy Murray and Naomi Osaka **PHOTO: AFP**

In the WTA event, four-time grand slam winner Naomi Osaka had little trouble in defeating Italy's Elisabetta Cocciaretto 6-3, 6-4 in one hour, and 18 minutes to move into the second round. Osaka is ranked 229th in the world after taking a break after having a child and spending over a year out of the game and is returning to the scene of her run to the final in 2022 where lost to Iga Swiatek in the final.

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Osaka said her performance was the best since she returned to the tour in Brisbane in January.

"Honestly, this is probably the most free that I was able to hit my balls, the closest to the feeling that I want to capture going forward, so I would say that this is probably my best match in terms of shot-making....I was swinging the best that I have since I have been back," she said.

Osaka will face another mother in the second round when she takes on Elina Svitolina of Ukraine who in 12 months back on the circuit is already back inside the top 20 — a return which Osaka says has inspired her.

"I remember watching her play at Wimbledon whilst I was pregnant and thinking that I want to be there too one day. I think she's always just been a great player so it's not surprising to me she's back in the top 20. It's where she belongs," said Osaka.

—AP